

PR
6015
H18b

**Southern Branch
of the
University of California
Los Angeles**

Form L 1

PR
6015
H18b

This book is DUE on the last date stamped below

JUN 9 1924

MAY 18 1925

JUL 14 1925

FEB 24 1926

APR 12 1926

MAY 17 1926

DEC 2 1927

MAY 1 1931

Staff

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

BY COSMO HAMILTON

PLAYS

The Blindness of Virtue.
A Sense of Humour.
Mrs. Skeffington.
The Gadsbys (with Rudyard Kipling).
The Wisdom of Folly.
Soldiers' Daughters.
Castles in Spain (with music).
Jerry and a Sunbeam.
The Belle of Mayfair (with music).
The Catch of the Season (with music).
The Beauty of Bath (with music).
Arsene Lupin.
The Mountain Climber.

NOVELS

The Outpost of Eternity.
The Infinity Capacity.
Adam's Clay.
Keepers of the House.
Nature's Vagabond.
Duke's Son.
Plain Brown.
The Blindness of Virtue.
etc.

ESSAYS

Brummell, Idiot and Philosopher.
Brummell Again.
Indiscretions.
Impertinent Reflections.

THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

BY
COSMO HAMILTON

25067

“Virtue is an angel, but she is a blind one, and must ask of knowledge to show her the pathway that leads to her goal.”



NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

Copyright, 1913,
By George H. Doran Company

ALBION L. O. TO VIND
HOWARD BERTUOS

PR
6015
H186

TO
BERYL

WITH ALL MY LOVE;
FOR WHOM AND THROUGH WHOM AND TO WHOM
I WROTE THIS LITTLE PLAY

CHARACTERS

THE REVEREND HARRY PEMBERTON.

THE HON. ARCHIBALD GRAHAM.

COLLINS.

MRS. PEMBERTON.

MRS. LEMMINS.

MARY ANN.

COOKIE.

EFFIE PEMBERTON.

SCENES

ACT I

The vicarage garden. Late afternoon in July.

ACT II

Harry Pemberton's den. Six weeks later.

ACT III

Archibald Graham's bedroom. Two mornings later.

ACT IV

Harry Pemberton's den. The same morning.

THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

ACT I 25067

The Scene of Act I represents the garden of the vicarage. This is an old house, almost Queen Anne, but not quite. It is, however, very old and sweet and prim and cheery and restful. It overlooks the little garden with motherly eyes, filled with quiet pride. And well it may because it is a garden to be proud of. Against a trellis on the worn red walls a swarm of sweet peas is running, many of whose charming heads are peeping boldly to see the world without. In all the beds there are flowers, old-fashioned and rich in colour. The lawn is shaved close, even the scanty beard of it that tries to grow beneath the old cedar tree that spreads its purple arms protectingly over it all. Through the white gates that cut the wall in two the village green can be seen, flat and bordered with small houses all with their own bits of gar-

den. A milkman's white horse is munching while he can, fowls hunt busily for succulent morsels and a string of geese wander aimlessly about.

The front door of the house is open. A rather worn oak chair can just be seen and a corner of a very elderly Turkish rug. There drifts into the garden the sound of someone,—almost obviously a girl, and a temperamental girl, practising on the piano, now irritably, now languidly, and always with an underlying sense of thinking of something better. There is no one in the garden except a little quaint figure, in a home-made black frock, higher in front than behind, and a large apron, ironed and starched too stiffly. On her wispy hair is stuck a whimsical cap that is altogether incapable of sitting straight. This is Cookie, who, with a touch of bravado, is picking sweet peas.

Through the gates comes a wiry middle-aged man with the moustache of one who drinks as often as luck wills it and tight fitting trousers, cleverly patched. He has a three days' growth of beard upon his chin and a quick, cunning, but not unhumorous, eye. His bare brown arms are closely tattooed. There is the Union Jack, the crest of a line

Regiment, a woman's name, a bleeding heart and a large, repulsive dragon. He wears no collar. There is a coloured handkerchief, wound into a sort of rope, round his neck, and an old wide-brimmed strawberry hat, yellow from rain and sun, on the back of his head. This is Fred Collins, the gardener, who has been in India and Singapore and Malta and Aldershot with his regiment and gravitated back to the soil and his native village to a wife with no front teeth and curlers and five perpetually dirty children.

Collins [hotly]. Now then, what are you doing with my sweet peas?

Cookie [looking up quietly and speaking in a ladylike voice]. Oh, it's you, Fred. I thought I knew the voice. Nice afternoon.

Collins [more angrily]. Nice afternoon me foot. If you want sweet peas ask me for 'em. Tearing about the bushes like that there, rippin' off the buds.

Cookie [sweetly]. There's a nice glass of beer jist inside the kitchen winder. What a funny thing I should have thought about it.

Collins [obviously appeased but not going to cave in at once]. I don't interfere with your kitchen, don't you interfere with my garden.

12 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

. . . Not that I gets much satisfaction from working like a black in it. The Vicar and the missus never 'as no time to look round.

Cookie. Well, we can't 'ave everything in this world.

Collins. I don't want everything. What I want is for them as I works for to appreciate it.

Cookie [looking at him with eyes wide open]. I have nothing but praise for you, Fred. [*Collins opening his mouth and finding himself unable to trust himself to say anything within earshot of the house, goes into roars of laughter.*]

Cookie [who has won the rub]. You ain't going to let that ale get flat, are yer?

Collins. Oh, woman, woman in our howers of hease! . . . Gor blimey. [*Flings up his hands and goes into house. Cookie smiles and then turns back to the sweet peas which she continues to pick. She sings quietly, "Give my regards to Regent Street," stopping in the middle of a line and going suddenly and swiftly to gate.*]

Cookie [addressing an unseen dog viciously]. I see yer, yer little devil. Been in the pond, mucked yerself all over, nar yer goin' to sneak in and dirty my floors. 'Ook it, go on 'ook it! If you think you're goin' to outwit me you're mistook, you streak o' cunning! . . . Go and

roll, go on now. Go and make yerself respectable. . . . Laugh would yer! [*She picks up stone. Collins comes out of house brushing the back of his hand over his moustache.*]

Collins. 'Ere now, 'ere, 'ere! Cruelty to animals!

Cookie [*flaming up*]. 'E's not an animal. 'E's an adventurer. Little beast. 'E's as bad as an open sore to me. . . . Go on away.

Collins. I'll soon see to 'im for yer. [*He goes out of gate.*] I'll biff 'im. Bill, come 'ere, darling. [*He disappears. Two hands are suddenly bashed upon the piano.*]

Cookie [*jumping*]. Oh, lor! What's that? [*Effie appears at window below door, climbs out of it and comes into garden. She is a beautiful slim girl of seventeen, with an oval face, large eyes full of a restless spirit and a mass of rich brown hair patched with streaks of copper.*]

Cookie [*at gate*]. Well done, Fred. Serve 'im right.

Effie. What's the matter, Cookie?

Cookie [*angrily*]. That there dawg. Little beast. 'E's the plague of my life. 'E eats like a giant, and be'aves like a ragamuffin. 'Is one joy in life is to make me feel a fool. If I 'adn't been along of your father and mother for twenty-two years I should give notice.

14 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Effie [*crossing to Cookie and putting her arms round her*]. No, you wouldn't.

Cookie. Yes, I should.

Effie. No, you wouldn't.

Cookie. Yes, I should.

Effie. No, you wouldn't.

Cookie. Well, then, no, I shouldn't. [*She bursts out laughing.*] There's only two things that'll make me give notice. Marriage . . . which ain't likely, and bein' turned out. . . .

Effie. Which isn't likely either. Be a philosopher, *Cookie*.

Cookie. I can't. I was born in the workus. [*She turns to gate and scuttles over to it.*] Oh, you would, would yer?

Effie [*going to gate and talking severely*]. How dare you, *Bill*! Go and dry instantly and don't appear again until you're thoroughly ashamed of yourself.

Cookie. And you might add, until he can make no marks on the 'all floor. *You!*

Effie [*going to seat under tree, with a sigh*]. Ah, me!

Cookie. What did you say?

Effie. I didn't say anything.

Cookie. No, but you sighed it and I don't wonder.

Effie [*sighing*]. Why?

Cookie. You a birthday girl struck seventeen and left all alone the 'ole of the day.

Effie. Father and mother are busy.

Cookie. Father and mother are busy! Did y'ever know 'em anything else week in week out? I call it a shame.

Effie. What?

Cookie. Why, that the Vicar can't get even a few hours off, or the missus either, to celebrate the event.

Effie. The event *has* been celebrated. Mother gave me her only ring except two, and father presented me with a watch. What more could I have? I don't deserve either.

Cookie. Oh, go on! All the same, of course, you would have liked your father and mother to spend the day with you. I think it's a bit o' cheek of old Joe Judd to need the Vicar until after your birthday. And that there club too. What's the parish want with a club? Isn't eight pubs enough for 'em? [*Cookie during this speech is busily picking sweet peas. Effie has put her head down on her arms and is sobbing bitterly.*]

Cookie. Perhaps you'll get a game of golf with the Vicar before the light goes and that'll be all right, won't it? [*She looks at Effie, drops the sweet peas and goes towards her quickly.*] Why! . . . what's this? Miss Ef-

16 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

fie, my dear . . . my dearie, what is it? Crying on yer birthday? Tell an old woman, then.

[*She puts her arms round the girl.*]

Effie [*still sobbing*]. Oh, don't, Cookie, don't. Leave me alone. No one can do anything for me. I feel hopeless.

Cookie [*shrilly*]. Hopeless! And you with a birthday!

Effie. That's why. You wouldn't understand. I don't understand, but that's why. [*She springs up and puts her arms round the old woman.*] I'm seventeen and I've done nothing, seen nothing. I'm seventeen and I'm treated like a child. I *am* a child. If I go on living here I shall *always* be a child.

Cookie [*in great surprise*]. But you don't want to go and live away from here, do you?

Effie. Oh, Cookie, I don't know what I want. I'm always wanting something and I don't know what it is. I'm always asking myself what's the matter, what's happened,—I used to be so happy,—and I can't find out. [*With sudden impatience and self-disgust.*] Oh, what a fool I am. For goodness' sake don't take any notice of me. [*She flings herself into the seat.*]

Cookie. Don't talk to me like that. I knew you before you had a birthday and you've just

got to tell me what's worrying you. [*She sits down by her side.*] Now then, dearie.

Effie [*catching up Cookie's hands*]. I'm a beast. I'm dissatisfied. It's awful. No girl living has got such a father and mother, or such a home, but all day long now I go about with a great constant—I don't know what. It makes me restless. I ask myself questions that I can't answer. Sometimes in the middle of the night or when I'm reading here alone, I get up and go and stand at the gate and try and peer over the horizon. I listen for something that never comes and wait breathless for something that never happens. I feel like a bird shut up in a cage and I want to burst the bars and fly. Cookie! What *does* it all mean?

Cookie [*shaking her head*]. I always thought you was so happy.

Effie [*vehemently*]. I *am* happy. I adore this place and I'd die for father and mother, but I'm a woman, not a baby, and doesn't life mean something more than the duties and games that I do every day, day after day, week after week, year after year? Isn't there anything more? [*She springs up.*] Why don't you tell me to shut up? Why don't you tell me that I ought to be ashamed of myself?

Cookie [*rising and putting her hands on*

Effie's arm]. You can't 'elp it, dearie. It's the east wind.

Effie [*simply*]. Is it? Yes, perhaps it is. But I'd give everything I have in the world if this queer feeling would never come to me. [*She sees sweet peas on the lawn and goes to them quickly.*] Oh, look at these darlings on the ground!

Cookie [*relieved and cheerful*]. Oh, my! I must have dropped 'em. I'm picking 'em to put in the young gentleman's bedroom.

Effie [*on her knees looking up quickly*]. Mr. Graham?

Cookie. That's 'im. The Vicar told me 'e was comin' this afternoon so I've made the spare room a sight for sore eyes.

Effie. Does father think he's coming?

Cookie. Why, of course. Don't you?

Effie. No, I don't. [*Enter Mrs. Pember-ton. She is a beautiful woman, very quiet in manner, a little delicate looking.*]

Cookie. Oh, here you are, at last. 'Bout time too.

Effie. Hullo, mother. [*She gets up and goes to her.*] Tired, darling?

Mrs. P. No, dear. Is father back?

Cookie. Oh, father! 'E's not likely to be back while the sun's up and then when there's nothing to do he'll make something.

Mrs. P. Is Mr. Graham's room ready?

Cookie. What a question!

Mrs. P. Don't let the mutton be overdone and you'd better put out the best tumblers.

Cookie. Oh, I haven't forgotten 'e's a swell.

Mrs. P. And don't put the butter in the asparagus dish. Serve it separately.

Cookie. Oh, that's the latest, is it? [*She bursts out laughing.*] My word! We shan't know ourselves soon. [*She goes into the house with a ludicrous imitation of a sort of lady.*]

Mrs. P. [*taking Effie into her arms*]. Well, darling? Have you had a nice birthday?

Effie. Yes, mother. Look! [*She holds out her hand.*] It fits me perfectly.

Mrs. P. You'll be careful not to overwind the watch, won't you?

Effie. Yes, mother.

Mrs. P. I'm so sorry that father and I have not been able to be with you to-day, darling. There is so much to be done and so little time to do it in.

Effie. Oh, please don't say that, mother. You make me feel a beast.

Mrs. P. [*surprised*]. Do I? How?

Effie. Oh, I don't know. After all, what *does* my birthday matter, when people are dying and being born and are ill and starving and

in trouble, and you and father can do so much for them all. I don't count.

Mrs. P. You do count and I can see that you mind. It's perfectly natural. But you see, darling, duty comes first. We will have a musical evening.

Effie [delightedly]. Oh, mother, can we? Do you think father will have time to sing some of his old Oxford songs?

Mrs. P. Yes, if. . . .

Effie. If what?

Mrs. P. If nobody wants him in the village. [*Harry Pemberton appears at gate, holding bicycle.*]

Harry [calling]. Collins! Collins!

Collins [off]. Sir?

Harry. Take my bike, will you? I'm afraid there's a puncture in the back wheel. I wish you'd see to it.

Collins [at gate]. Right you are, sir.

Harry. As soon as you can. I'm certain to want it again to-day.

Collins. Right you are, sir. [*Harry enters the garden. As he does so Effie makes a dart at him and flings her arms round his neck. He stands six foot one of bone and muscle. Under the brim of his old straw hat a large, well-formed nose divides a pair of dark, humorous, steady eyes. The lips of a particu-*

larly beautiful, sensitive mouth are smiling. A long, determined chin, great square shoulders and a back as flat as a blackboard, eager hands, feet stuck into large shoes studded with nails,—that's Harry Pemberton.]

Harry [kissing her and then holding her away from him]. Seventeen, seventeen! Think of it. In the twinkling of an eye you'll be no longer my little girl, but a woman with her hair up, stuffed full of hairpins, and being your father's daughter you'll shed 'em about the passages. . . . I'm sorry I couldn't give you anything better than a watch, my baby.

Effie. I love it. It's the only thing I've ever wanted.

Harry. The only thing! That's good. It was given to me when *I* was seventeen and if properly treated it'll be alive and kicking for yet another seventeenth birthday. I wish I'd had the money to give you a brand new one, but I think you know that this old watch ticks out the great love and friendship and respect of your old chum and father, eh, darling? [*Effie kisses Harry emotionally.*]

Mrs. P. I think you'd better wear your best waistcoat this evening, dear.

Harry [laughing and coming down with Effie]. Not I! It means wearing a choker with

22 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

it and I'll be hanged if I'll do that. No sign of the boy yet, I suppose?

Mrs. P. No. But everything's ready.

Effie. I don't think he'll come.

Mrs. P. But he *is* coming. It's arranged.

Effie. I don't think he'll come.

Mrs. P. Why do you say that?

Harry. Well, *I'm* beginning to wonder whether he will. I had a letter this afternoon from his father. It was sent down by train and brought to me at Joe Judd's, who, by the way, is going to be wheeled round this afternoon to see the sweet peas.

Mrs. P. [*surprised*]. A letter from Lord Aberlady?

Effie. What's it about?

Harry [*sitting on seat*]. Well, it evidently cost the old gentleman a great effort to write. It's the outcome of a conscientious desire to give me the whole black details of this boy's past.

Mrs. P. Poor boy.

Effie [*sitting on her legs on the grass*]. Read it, father.

Harry. Perhaps I'd better. I shall have to cram him and take the much needed money for it. But you two, after all, will have to put up with him after hours, so it's as much your concern as mine. [*He opens letter.*] "A hundred Grosvenor Square, July 17, nineteen

eleven. Dear Sir, let me come at once to the reason of my troubling you with this letter. You have made it convenient to receive my second son into your house. He is supposed to be with you this afternoon. I have already explained to you that the reason of my asking you to read with him is that, under existing circumstances, I cannot do with him under my roof.

Effie. Old beast!

Mrs. P. Hush, dear.

Harry [drily]. He is the minister for education in the present government — a very distinguished man. “I also feel that I may not have been wholly frank with you, as to my son’s disposition. Honestly I have neither his confidence nor his obedience and my efforts hitherto to put him on the road along which I desire him to walk, have failed utterly.”

Effie. He writes like a minister of education!

Mrs. P. Effie! Effie!

Harry [reading]. “Having accepted the charge of my son you have the right to know the following details.”

Effie. Now for it!

Harry [reading]. “He was educated at Eton. I ought to tell you that his record there was a bad one. If it had not been for his ex-

24 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

cellence in the cricket field the head master would have rid the school of his presence. Later he went up to Oxford. The independence of the undergraduate did not, as I hoped, steady my son. On the contrary, his career at Oxford was short. He was sent down in the middle of his second year. He will come to you aged twenty-two, having been almost a year in London at a loose end. He is, in no sense of the word, a degenerate, nor does he seem to be a bad hearted young man. So far as he has permitted me to make his acquaintance, he seems to be capable of improvement. I believe him to be proud, headstrong, self-indulgent, generous, utterly uncontrollable in a bearing rein, but so easily influenced that he is as likely to drag my name into the gutter if left with his present friends as he is likely to be lifted above the ordinary level of human creatures if he falls into such hands as yours. [*Effie bends down and kisses Harry's hands.*] I am well aware that I am asking you to undertake a grave responsibility. As my son will not hesitate, if he does enter your house, to pack up and leave it at once, should he not take a liking to you, the responsibility is one which may not last long. I trust that this may not be the case and if your influence saves my son from becoming a member of the regiment of dissipated, shifty, useless

and harmful creatures into which so many of our younger sons are drifting, I shall be grateful indeed. Believe me, dear sir, yours faithfully, Aberlady."

Effie. He won't come.

Harry. He will come, and what then? [*To his wife.*] Are you afraid? Do you think he'll have cockshies at your best tumblers?

Mrs. P. Three hundred a year will go a long way in the village. But utterly uncontrollable, headstrong, self-indulgent. . . .

Harry [*with a laugh*]. That description fits ninety-nine per cent of men who are worth their salt.

Effie. He won't come.

Harry. He plays cricket. All I hope is that he bowls. We're frightfully short of bowlers, and if he plays golf, my dear, won't you two be able to have some matches!

Effie [*jumping up*]. Ah! If *only* he'll come. Do you think he'll walk or have a cab?

Mrs. P. Oh, he'll walk of course.

Harry. He's certain to have a cab.

Effie. The three forty will just about be in. I'm going to see if there's any sign of him. [*She flies through the gate.*]

Harry. Young Graham will be a godsend to Effie. I'm afraid she's very lonely and that she mopes sometimes.

26 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Mrs. P. [surprised]. Lonely? Why?

Harry. The only child, you see. No one to play with, no one to confide in, no one to quarrel with, no one to compete with. It isn't good.

Mrs. P. [proudly]. But she confides in me, always.

Harry. Yes, darling, of course she does. Let us hope she always will. Still, I'm glad that young Archie Graham's coming, for Effie's sake as well as for ours. Think what we can do among our poor with three hundred a year. We can instantly build the new room for the club. Won't that be immense! I'll give the boy six hundred pounds' worth of tuition.

Mrs. P. [smiling]. I know you will. The only thing I'm afraid of is that you will work too hard.

Harry. No man can work too hard. Life's very short and there is much to be done.

Mrs. P. Harry, how did Lord Aberlady's letter strike you?

Harry. It tells us nothing. All Archie Graham wants is to be trusted. Why, if I hadn't been trusted and put on my honour I should have gone hopelessly to the devil. [*He puts his hand on his wife's shoulders.*] Have you had time to realise that our baby is seventeen?

Mrs. P. [smiling]. Isn't it wonderful!

Harry. We've been married eighteen years.

Mrs. P. [softly]. Isn't it wonderful!

Harry [in a deep voice]. And I nearly lost you seventeen years ago, my dear. Very nearly. You gave me Effie and stood very close to the open door. Are you glad you didn't go in and leave us both alone?

Mrs. P. Oh, Harry!

Harry [with emotion]. Have I been a good man to you, little woman? Have I left anything undone that you'd like me to do? Have I been even half grateful enough that you stayed?

Mrs. P. Dearest! [*Effie comes into the garden, slamming the gate.*]

Effie. No sign of a cab. Well, after all, I don't think he plays golf so it doesn't matter.

Mrs. P. [to Harry]. You'll try and have nothing to do to-night, won't you? If you're not here I don't know how we shall amuse the boy.

Harry [with a short laugh]. It's not much use trying. I promised to go and see poor Mrs. Lemmins. It's eight months to-day since Mary Ann disappeared. Poor little Mary Ann with the angel face and golden hair. And Joe Judd can't last much longer. All I can give the boy is an hour after dinner and perhaps we can

get a pipe together before we go to bed,— if he comes. [*Collins comes to the gate. He grins excitedly.*]

Collins. Cab at door, sir.

Effie [*excitedly*]. He *has* come, then.

Harry [*catching the contagion*]. Ask Mr. Graham to come round into the garden and bring his luggage through this way.

Collins. Right you are, sir. [*He salutes with a characteristic touch of exaggeration. He goes off.*]

Effie. I wonder what he is like?

Mrs. P. [*all in a fluster*]. Hadn't we better leave you to meet him alone?

Harry. Yes, that's a good idea.

Mrs. P. Come along, dear.

Effie. I shall peer out of the window. Father, I'll bet you a bob he's short and fat. [*She follows Mrs. P. into the house, all alight.*]

[*Harry finds himself, to his own amusement, just a little nervous. The words of the letter flash through his mind. He stands irresolute for a moment and then, with a desire to put the boy at his ease and let him come upon a man who, although a clergyman, is a sportsman, takes up a mashie that is standing against the seat and swings it. Archie Graham appears at gate. He is tall and slight and clean shaven, good-*

looking and well-dressed. He wears a half sulky, half supercilious expression and his eyes are suspicious. There are one or two curiously old lines round his mouth. He comes down a step or two and stands watching Harry who pretends not to see him. There is a slight pause.]

Archie. Mr. Pemberton?

Harry [looking up]. Yes. Are you Graham?

Archie [touching his hat]. Please.

Harry [stretching out his hand]. How are you?

Archie [slightly antagonistic]. Very well, thanks.

Harry [eyeing him surreptitiously]. Sorry I couldn't meet you at the station.

Archie. Oh, not a bit!

Harry. You chose an excellent train.

Archie. Yes, a non-stopper. I thought this place was further away. It's not so far off the map as I . . . I mean. . . .

Harry [with a laugh]. As a matter of fact it is off the map although we're only sixteen miles from Hyde Park Corner. [*He swings the mashie in an interested manner, treating the boy almost casually as though his arrival was a very ordinary affair.*]

Archie [watching him closely]. It's rather pretty here, isn't it? A little flat perhaps.

Harry. The brickmaking, orchard district, you know. All our women work in the fields and most of our men are brickees when they condescend to work at all, which isn't often. And curiously enough there is a rather large Irish contingent round the green. How's your father?

Archie. He's well I believe, thanks.

Harry. You'll have tea, won't you?

Archie. No, thanks. I had tea at Paddington.

Harry [holding out case]. A cigarette?

Archie [after a slight hesitation]. Thanks.

Harry. I don't recommend them but they are not more poisonous than most.

Archie [looking at it with something of patronage]. Oh, this is a pretty safe brand.

Harry [abruptly]. Sit down.

Archie. Well, I. . . .

Harry. Yes? [He smiles at the boy.]

Archie [sitting]. Thank you. [He is obviously ill at ease and constrained. He fidgets with his fingers and continues to look searchingly at Harry when unobserved.]

Harry. What's your theory as to the length of a mashie?

Archie [*drawling*]. I dunno. Don't think I've ever thought about it.

Harry. I mean do you like 'em short or long, large faced or more of the jigger school?

Archie. Oh, I just bought one and I've stuck to it ever since. They called it a mashie and I used it as such.

Harry [*with a laugh*]. A contented mind, eh?

Archie [*with a bitterness so horrible and full of history that Harry drops the mashie and eyes him with a new look*]. Contented!

Harry. What have you been reading for?

Archie [*a little humbly*]. I'm afraid I've not been reading, sir.

Harry. Are you a rich man? I mean are you going to read with me in order to earn a living?

Archie. Yes — that's the notion.

Harry. Good. A man who doesn't have to earn his bread and butter misses the joy of life. You've decided what you're going to read for now I take it?

Archie. The Bar.

Harry. Oh, excellent. I'll look out all my old books. Some of 'em will be useful.

Archie [*looking up*]. Did you read for the bar, sir?

Harry. Yes. Tremendously hard. I was going in for the bar and politics at one time.

Archie. What made you chuck it and go into the church — I beg your pardon.

Harry [*with intense solemnity*]. If ever the time comes when I am obliged to tell anyone why I went into the church, Archibald Graham, it will be the worst day in my life. [*Collins passes through with a shirt case on his shoulder.*]

Collins. Shall I take it upstairs, sir?

Harry. Ah, your baggage. Yes, upstairs, Collins. Mr. Graham's room is my old dressing room. [*Collins goes into house.*]

Archie. I hope I'm not. . . .

Harry. Not a bit. A dressing room is a luxury. Er . . . is that all you've brought?

Archie [*quickly*]. A telegram will bring the rest.

Harry. Shall Collins take a wire at once?

Archie. Well. . . .

Harry [*bluntly but kindly*]. If not, my dear fellow, there's a fast train back to Paddington in half an hour. What will you do? Take it or send a wire?

Archie [*after a distinct pause during which he looks into Harry's eyes*]. I'll wire, please.

Harry [*quietly*]. Thanks, old chap.

[*Takes out a pocket book.*] Here's a form and a pencil. [*He puts them on table. The boy writes.*] Don't forget to ask for your golf clubs and cricket bag.

Archie [*without looking up*]. I have.

Harry. Good. [*Collins comes into garden.*]

Archie. May I. . . .

Harry. Yes. Collins, just go down to the post office, will you? Ask Mrs. Wimley to send that off at once.

Collins. Right you are, sir.

Archie. Here's the money. Don't bother about the change.

Collins [*saluting*]. Right you are, sir. [*He spits on the coin. There is a drink in the offing. You almost hear it going into the glass. There is an added spring in his walk as he goes off.*]

Harry. And now come and have a look at your room.

Archie [*quickly and with a touch of agitation*]. Would it put you out if we stayed here for a minute? I . . . I want to speak to you.

Harry. Fire away.

Archie [*pausing uncomfortably and pulling himself up to an unusual proceeding*]. Before I go into your house I want to lay everything out straight with you, sir, at once.

34 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Harry [*sitting on the chair below door*].
Go ahead, old fellow.

Archie. And I'm going to ask you to answer one or two questions bluntly if you don't mind, without any attempt to spare my feelings.

Harry [*with a smile*]. Right.

Archie [*bending down and picking up a sweet pea and fidgeting with it*]. Was I packed off to you by the Guvnor as a waster?

Harry. Pretty well like that.

Archie. He sent me to you much as a drunkard is sent to a rescue home?

Harry. Much in the same way.

Archie. With a detailed list of my misdoings at Eton and Oxford?

Harry. Pretty detailed.

Archie [*flinging away the sweet pea and turning to Harry quickly*]. That's how I was sent to Eton — under suspicion. That's how I went up to Oxford, still under suspicion. I was labelled suspicious goods. I knew that I was watched and expected to break out into some rottenness! It spoilt Eton for me and ruined my chances at Oxford.

Harry. My dear fellow. . . .

Archie [*with a burst*]. I don't say that I'm not rotten. I don't say that I'm not a mass of detestable characteristics, but the one sure way of bringing these things to the top was to sus-

pect me. I've had nothing to live up to and I've done stinking things everywhere out of bitterness and anger. I want you to know this before we go any further. I want you to know my side of it all, and I want to ask you for *God's sake* not to begin by suspecting me. Do you?

Harry [rising and looking at the boy all over]. No. *[He holds out his hand.]*

Archie [seizing it and crumpling over it]. Ah!

Harry. Now, look here, Archie Graham, as we are in a sort of way rubbing noses and becoming friends, let me say something too. I don't know your father personally. From what he's done for the country he's a big man, but I can see from his letter that he doesn't understand you.

Archie [brokenly]. No, he doesn't.

Harry. I expect he's always treated you as a man should treat a man and not as a man should treat a boy. He began by believing, no doubt, that you had no sense of honour, when he ought to have given you credit for possessing as great a sense of honour as he possesses and put you on it.

Archie. If only he had.

Harry. And as to your horrible misdeeds at Eton and Oxford,—my dear good fellow,

36 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

when and where is a man to commit the harmless necessary horrible misdeeds of his green youth except at Eton and Oxford, unless it's at Charterhouse and Cambridge. Your father and those asses at Eton and Oxford, all of them book stuffed, theorising apes only fitted to make rules for the conduct of dead things, have made you self-conscious, eh? Well, all that's over.

Archie [*looking up wistfully*]. Over?

Harry. Yes, over and done with.

Archie. How?

Harry. You and I are brothers, just two ordinary good sorts, ready to break out and go arm in arm with nature to the gutter, but for the sympathy of each other,—and of that other Brother of ours. I'm going to give you all the trust and sympathy that I've got and you're going to do the same by me. When we stand on our hind legs and have the infernal bumptiousness to say that we feel no need for sympathy and help, providence, always on the lookout for the braggart, will put in one straight from the shoulder and hit us very hard. Your cigarette's out. Have another.

Archie. No, thanks [*quickly*]. May I tell you one other thing?

Harry. If you feel you must.

Archie. I think you ought to know that I was sent down from Oxford.

Harry. Loads of men are sent down who don't deserve such drastic treatment.

Archie. I did deserve it, though.

Harry. Glad to hear it.

Archie [*surprised*]. Glad?

Harry. Yes, of course. If a man knows that he deserves punishment, he doesn't grumble when he gets it and ten to one it's a good thing for him. Punishment only has a bad effect on the man who doesn't deserve it, and gets it. If he's not a pretty strong fellow he either develops into a criminal or deteriorates into a sloppy creature with a perpetual grievance.

Archie. I want to start fair with you, sir. I can't even dream of staying under your roof until you know exactly what I did. I don't want to remain here under false pretences.

Harry. I'm not going to know. I'm not your judge, my dear chap. I'm your friend and I believe in you. Forget the incident. You've had your knockout blow and you're on your feet again. The thing's over. Now then, I'll toss you which of us has the bath.

Cookie [*at door*]. Telephone!

Harry. Right. [*He lays his hand on the boy's shoulder for a moment and goes quickly into the house. Archie goes over to the tree-seat. All his movements are now boyish and*

38 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

there is a sort of eagerness and surprise in all his lines of body.]

Cookie [*full of curiosity to inspect the "swell" and obviously making an excuse to speak to him*]. How do you like potatoes? Plain boiled or sorty?

Archie [*with a little laugh*]. Oh, anyhow, thanks.

Cookie. That's no answer. Being a swell I should have thought you liked 'em sorty.

Archie [*amused*]. Plain boiled.

Cookie. I hoped you'd say that. It's less trouble. [*She goes nearer.*] Do you know you've brought no pyjamas?

Archie. I've just wired for my things. I forgot them,—that is I didn't bring them.

Cookie. I shall like you.

Archie. Thanks very much.

Cookie. Perhaps I'd better introduce myself. Miss Ethel Meadows, commonly called Cookie by her friends.

Archie. How do you do, Cookie? [*He holds out his hand.*]

Cookie [*enthusiastically*]. Oh, you *are* all right, you are. [*Shakes.*] I gathered you were a bit of a terror.

Archie [*drily*]. My reputation generally precedes me.

Cookie. Let me give you a tip. There's a

dog called Bill who lives here. If you want to be on good terms with me don't let 'im sleep on your bed.

Archie. It's a bargain. Anything else?

Cookie. No, that's all. Oh, yes, there is one other thing. If you read in bed at nights, don't stick the candle on your chest. I don't mind how I die so long as it isn't by fire.

Archie. Consider it settled.

Cookie. Here, you're a bit of an angel. [*She goes off in a sort of a pea-hen laugh.*]

Archie. Glad you think so. [*Enter Mrs. Pemberton. Cookie goes to her eagerly.*]

Cookie [*in a stage whisper*]. I've put him through 'is paces, mum, and 'e's all right.

Mrs. P. Ssh! *Cookie.*

Cookie. Plain boiled, eh? Well, you shall 'ave 'em. [*She nods to Archie and goes in. Her curious shrill laugh hangs on the air.*]

Mrs. P. How do you do?

Archie [*coming forward and taking her hand*]. How do you do?

Mrs. P. I'm very glad you've come.

Archie [*boyishly*]. So am I.

Mrs. P. I'm afraid your room's rather small.

Archie. I don't mind how small my room is. It's in your house.

Mrs. P. But you're going to do your work in my husband's den.

Archie [*eagerly*]. Am I really?

Mrs. P. [*apologising*]. I won't apologise for Cookie.

Archie. Oh, please don't. She's immense.

Mrs. P. She's been with us twenty years and perhaps she takes a little advantage of it. Is your father quite well?

Archie. I think so, thanks.

Mrs. P. And your mother?

Archie [*simply*]. I haven't got a mother. She died when I was born.

Mrs. P. Oh, I'm sorry.

Archie. So am I. I've missed her . . . badly.

Mrs. P. The golf links is only a stone's throw from here.

Archie. Oh, that's ripping. Do you play?

Mrs. P. No, but my husband does,—when he has time.

Archie. I don't suppose that's very often.

Mrs. P. No, it isn't.

Cookie [*at door*]. May I speak to you a moment, mum?

Mrs. P. Certainly, Cookie. [*To Archie.*] Will you excuse me?

Archie. Oh, please. [*Mrs. Pemberton drops a note book. Archie picks it up, gives*

it to her, bends over her hand and kisses it.]

Mrs. P. Oh, thank you. [*She turns slowly and goes in with a little smile on her face.*]

[*Archie stands quite still for a moment, where he is, facing audience. After a moment he takes off his hat and opens his arms, breathing in the air. His whole face is changed. He looks younger and contented. Effie peeps round the gate.*]

Archie [*involuntarily*]. The Guvnor shall see. I've got my chance. . . . I've got my chance at last. [*Effie saunters in, trying to appear as though she had known hundreds of men in her time and leaning against table.*]

Archie [*turning*]. I beg your pardon. I'm Graham.

Effie [*looking at him and smiling*]. I know.

Archie. How do you do?

Effie. I'm very well, thank you. What's your handicap?

Archie. A bad eight. I suppose you're awfully good?

Effie. Oh, I'm pretty useful,— for a woman. [*She breaks suddenly into a fit of nervousness and shyness. Archie stands watching her.*]
Have you met Bill?

Archie. Yes. He introduced himself to me

outside. I've met Cookie, too, and Mrs. Pemberton. Are you, er . . . are you the Vicar's sister?

Effie [laughing]. No, I'm his pal — I mean his daughter.

Archie. You couldn't be one without the other.

Effie [leaning towards him eagerly]. Then you *aren't* going back within twelve hours as your father said you. . . .

Archie [sharply]. Did my father say that?

Effie. I'm so sorry. It slipped out.

Archie. It doesn't matter. I suppose my father wrote that if I didn't cotton on to the Vicar, I should chuck East Brenton.

Effie. Yes.

Archie. Um! And that's what I should have done.

Effie. Would you really?

Archie. Like a shot. But it so happens that I like your father a million times better already than any man I've ever met, and that's only a tenth part of how I'm going to like him.

Effie. I knew you would if you came.

Archie. I'd have to be deaf and blind not to. I wish I'd known him since the beginning of the world. [*He laughs frankly.*] That's my egotistical way of saying since I was born.

Effie. I know.

Archie [going nearer to her and losing self-consciousness]. I'm going to mug like blazes with your father, to make up for lost time. Are you working?

Effie. No, I never do anything,—at least nothing very much. Mother's so busy that I look after the house and make my frocks and practise the piano and every now and then, when I can't help myself, I write a story about some of the dreadful things of life.

Archie [astonished]. Good Lord! What do you know about the dreadful things of life?

Effie. Nothing. So I tear my stories up.

Archie. You seem to have so much to do, and I'm going to have so much to do, that it doesn't look much like golf for either of us.

Effie. Before breakfast and before dinner.

Archie [with a laugh]. What time's breakfast?

Effie. Eight o'clock.

Archie. By Jove! Means getting up at six then.

Effie. Can't you?

Archie. I'd get up at five to play golf with you.

Effie. I'll introduce you to our links to-morrow.

Archie. Right. Thanks most awfully.
[Enter Harry from house.]

44 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Harry. Effie — Archie. Archie — Effie.

Archie. We've met.

Cookie [*putting her head out of door*].
Dinner in five minutes.

Harry. Mr. Archibald Graham — Cookie.

Archie. We've met too.

Cookie [*with a loud chuckle*]. Well I never!

Harry. Well, you've not wasted much time, have you?

Archie. Not a second. [*Enter Mrs. Pemberton from house.*]

Harry. Am I to take it that you've chummed up to my wife as well as to every other member of this house?

Archie. Yes, please.

Mrs. P. [*taking his arm*]. Let me show you your room.

Archie. Thanks. Queen Ann, isn't it? A great period. And by Jove, what yews. [*They go in together.*]

Harry [*to Effie eagerly*]. Well, what do you think about him?

Effie. I've not had time to think about him yet, darling.

Harry. But do you think you'll like him when you *have* got time to think about him?

Effie. I didn't want any time to think about that. I liked him at once.

Harry. Good. That's exactly how he affected me. [*The dinner gong goes.*]

Effie. The first gong. And I haven't washed. [*Runs to door and turns.*] Do come, darling. You must be starving.

Harry [*putting his arm round her*]. I can't, my baby girl.

Effie [*drawing away and speaking with a note of awful disappointment*]. Father! You're . . . you're surely not going away *to-night*?

Harry. I'm very sorry, but I must. We'll keep the birthday to-morrow night.

Effie [*hysterically*]. To-morrow, to-morrow! What's the good of to-morrow. It's to-day. What's the use of a birthday to me without *you* for a minute. I wish I'd never had a birthday. I'm not wanted. No one wants me. I'm no use. I'm only in the way. Nothing is right. I wish I'd never, never been born. [*She bursts into sobbing.*]

Harry [*startled, eyeing her in wonder*]. Effie! . . . What are you saying? [*He puts his arm round her tenderly.*] Nothing is right; little girl? I always thought that you and I were bosom friends with no secrets from each other. It seems that you have hidden something from me if nothing is right.

Effie. I didn't mean that. I could bite my tongue off for saying that. I'm a discontented

46 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

beast. Don't worry about me. Only I've been longing all day to have you for just *one* evening in the year, my *own* evening, darling. Don't go.

Harry. I must, dearest. There is work for me to do.

Effie. What work?

Harry. My work, which must come before everything else, even when it concerns those I love best in the world. Old Joe Judd is dying. He needs me. [*Effie's hands go up to her mouth. She stands awed and quiet.*] Do you see? . . . Good night, my baby. [*He kisses her and turns up.*] Bill, Bill! [*He goes off briskly calling for the dog.*]

[*Curtain.*]

ACT II

The Scene is laid in Harry Pemberton's study. It is a large room, matchboarded up to within three feet of the ceiling. At the top of matchboarding there is a shelf which runs all round the room. This is lined with books of all sizes and colours, except at C. back where there is a semi-circular built out window. The window seat is covered with cushions. The walls are closely hung with college groups framed. There is a door down R. An old stone fireplace with the fire on the hearth L.C. The mantelboard is strewn with pipes and silver cups. Above it are hung a number of small frames in which there are photos of the men at Oxford in Harry's time. On the right of window there is a village-made writing desk. It has three drawers on each side of it and a shelf running at the back. It is littered with books, papers, tobacco tins, etc. On the L. of window there is a Jacobean chest on the top of which stands a stack of drawers, labelled. In other available spaces there are golf clubs, a sporting rifle

48 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

or two, and several tennis racquets. A somewhat shabby turkey carpet covers the floor, on the middle of which there is a small table. On this there is a large oil lamp and some rather nice books. There are comfortable chairs round the fireplace and elsewhere.

[When curtain rises, Archie is discovered sitting on window seat smoking a pipe, reading and making notes. He is obviously absorbed in his work. Harry is seated at his desk with his back to audience writing hard. There is a silence for a moment after the curtain has risen. Cookie enters. She leaves the door open and there drifts into the room the sound of a piano in the distance and a young girl's voice singing. Archie looks up. He listens with a smile on his face.]

Cookie. Work, work, work! Always at work. 'Pon my soul I never knew such a lot.

Harry [*without looking up*]. What is it, *Cookie*, what is it?

Cookie. All right then. It's a letter brought by a lad from the Canal. By the writing I should say it's from Mrs. Lemmins. Also by the whiff.

Harry [*turning round quickly*]. Let me

have it, Cookie. [*He opens it and reads eagerly.*]

Cookie [*looking towards Archie*]. You ain't playin' your usual game of tennis to-night then, Mr. Archie?

Archie. No, not to-night. The grass is too wet. Skidding cuts it up.

Harry. You're perfectly right, it is from Mrs. Lemmins. [*He rises excitedly.*] Mary Ann has come home again.

Cookie. You don't say so.

Harry. At last!

Cookie. About time, too. Eight months away and never a word. I never did trust yer soft spoken, angel-faced, sugar-in-the-mouth girls myself.

Harry [*turning to Cookie rather sharply*]. You will kindly tell the lad that I will see Mrs. Lemmins as soon as she can come.

Cookie. Very good, sir. [*She turns and as she goes out she makes a little face at Archie. When door is shut no sound of the piano can be heard.*]

Harry [*pacing the room*]. Home at last! Little Mary Ann. What in Heaven's name has she been doing? I'd give a year of my life to know that she's safe.

Archie [*looking up. The evening sun is on his sun-tanned face.*] Who is Mary Ann?

Harry [in a voice that quivers a little]. The daughter, the only daughter of a very good body who works the Albert Edward barge on the canal. She was born on the same night as Effie. She was the best and most flower-like little girl in the school. She disappeared just before Christmas. Police and missionaries have been unable to find her. Thank God she's come back.

Archie [warmly, but with a slight hesitation]. I believe you're a father to everybody in this village, sir.

Harry [unself-consciously and without any of the shame of insularity]. My dear fellow, I'm a parson. I try to be the servant of the Universal Father. His children are my children. . . . How are you getting on?

Archie. Better. I really do think that I'm getting back at last something of the habit of work.

Harry [at work again and smoking hard]. Don't try and fly before you can walk. You've only been at it three weeks you know. Effie tells me that you can give her a stroke every morning now. Your golf is going strong at any rate. She's not easy to beat.

Archie [warmly]. She takes a beating like a man. Er . . . I had a letter from the gov'nor this morning, sir.

Harry. Oh, what did he say?

Archie. It was rather a nice letter. He seemed a bit surprised that my address is still East Brenton.

Harry [*with a laugh*]. Are you never going to town again?

Archie. Not if I can help it. I hate the place.

Harry. Do you? I don't. When I went up to the Middlesex Hospital the other day to see how one of my men was getting on who had had an operation, I missed the train at Paddington and had to wait half an hour. The noise and bustle of the station excited me. I felt as though I'd had a week's holiday in some foreign place.

Archie. You never go to London, do you?

Harry. I've too much to do. Oh, by the way, I've been fitting out a gymnasium for the elder boys. I stand in need of an instructor. [*He looks up, whimsically.*] Er . . .

Archie [*eagerly*]. Oh, by Jove, may I . . .

Harry [*with a smile*]. Will you?

Archie [*rising*]. I'd give my ears to help you in some way or other.

Harry. Thanks.

Archie. Don't thank me. I have to thank you. I don't think you quite know what you're doing for me. I feel — human here.

Harry. Impart some of your feeling to these slouching lads, old chap. Help me to keep them out of the public house. It's not easy. [*Enter Cookie.*]

Cookie. I can't 'elp myself, but that Mrs. Watkins is 'ere again. It's 'er sorr this time.

Harry [*wheeling round*]. What about her son?

Cookie. He's caught his feet in the machinery of the mill. . . .

Harry [*going quickly to door*]. Oh, good heavens! [*Exit.*]

Cookie. They say there's no rest for the wicked. How about the good?

Archie. Yes, by Jove! Isn't he . . . isn't he . . .

Cookie. Isn't he just! . . . Now then, now then, no slackin'. Thought you was at work?

Archie [*with a laugh*]. Good for you, *Cookie*. May I have a box of matches?

Cookie. What — another? I believe you eat 'em. Well, here you are. [*She delves into her pocket and brings out a box.*] You'll ruin us if you go on like this. And I don't know whether you know it, but you eat enough for three.

Archie [*with comic seriousness*]. Do I? I must watch it.

Cookie. Oh, go on. I was only pullin'

your leg. And get back to your books otherwise there'll be a scandal in the village. [*She breaks into a cackle of laughter and goes off. Archie returns to his seat and his books. The light comes golden on the back cloth which shows a charming corner of the garden. Effie appears at window.*]

Effie. Hello!

Archie. Hello!

Effie. Still at it?

Archie. Apparently. . . . What were you singing?

Effie. I dunno. Any old thing.

Archie. I like those old things — when you sing 'em.

Effie. I'm not going to disturb you, but I'm coming in and I'm going to sit here. [*She climbs into the window and sits on other end of window seat. Archie laughs.*] What's the matter? What are you laughing at?

Archie. The mere notion of your sitting there not disturbing me would make Homer laugh.

Effie [touchily]. I never met the gentleman. I don't care whether he laughs or not. Because he would imitate a hyena there's no reason why you should. I'll go. [*She gets up abruptly and walks to door.*]

Archie [springing up and chucking his book

away]. Effie . . . Effie. [*He rushes to door and puts his back against it.*] For the Lord's sake don't go.

Effie. I disturb your work. Let me pass, please. [*Coldly.*]

Archie [*hotly*]. You do disturb my work. I want you to disturb my work. I can work till I'm sixty but I shan't always be able to see you and hear your voice. [*Gets hopelessly self-conscious and hitches his shoulders.*] Do come and sit down. [*Effie wavers. The boy continues eloquently.*] I've been mugging the whole blessed afternoon. I've put in two more hours to-day than any other day since I've been here and in any case we should have been playing tennis but for the rain.

Effie [*with a sudden smile*]. Very well. I'll forgive Mr. Homer. [*She takes a skip and a jump to the window and sits swinging her legs.*]

Archie [*following her*]. I'm getting frightfully keen on this stuff. The only thing is I'm hopelessly behind with it all. I ought to have been doing this two years ago.

Effie [*airily*]. No grumbles.

Archie. I'm not grumbling. I'm getting fat with content. I say!

Effie. What?

Archie. I had a ripping letter from the guv'nor this morning. He is a corker.

Effie [astonished]. I thought you didn't like him.

Archie. Why?

Effie. Well, one doesn't generally like a beast, does one?

Archie. But he's not a beast. He's one of the best. It was as much my fault as his that we didn't pull together. After all it's hopeless to expect a man to understand a son when he hasn't got a wife to supply the key. I shall look him up soon. [*He looks frightfully pleased at his academic bombast.*]

Effie [quickly]. When? Do you mean go to London?

Archie. Yes. In about — six months from now. [*He grins at her.*]

Effie [relieved]. Oh, I thought you meant at once. Awful rot not getting any tennis to-night.

Archie. Now you're grumbling.

Effie. No, I'm not. I haven't grumbled for three weeks.

Archie. Why three weeks?

Effie. I dunno. But I know it's three weeks because the last time I grumbled it was on my birthday and everything has been so awfully different since then.

Archie [*eagerly*]. Has it? Why?

Effie [*simply*]. I absolutely don't know. I seem to have had more to do, more to think about, more to be interested in — [*Suddenly she begins to laugh.*]

Archie. What's up?

Effie. I am a fool!

Archie. Why?

Effie. I do know. It's you.

Archie [*bending forward*]. Me?

Effie. Yes, you. Of course it's you. I've not been lonely since you came. We've jawed and fought the most fearful battles at golf and tennis and all the time *you've* been working, *I've* been working.

Archie. What at?

Effie. The Law Prelim.

Archie. What!

Effie [*looking at him*]. I'm just as keen on your getting through your exams as you are, so in a sort of way I am behind your books with you.

Archie. Ah! Now I see. [*Enter Cookie.*]

Cookie [*excitedly*]. A wire for you.

Archie [*springing up*]. For me?

Effie. A wire? [*It might almost be a bombshell.*]

Cookie. Well, it's got Graham on it. I

hate telegrams. Having no postmark you can't make a guess at who they're from.

Archie [*taking it, looking at it anxiously*]. I hope to Heaven nothing's happened to the guv'nor. [*He opens it.*]

Effie. Well?

Cookie. For goodness' sake don't say it's bad news. What with Mrs. Lemmins and young Watkins I'm fairly jumpy.

Archie. By Jove, it's from old Winstanley. Great work! He's home. [*He reads.*] "On leave, lunch to-morrow Cavalry Club, one thirty. Dine Carlton, do show, Winstanley, 15, Bury Street." Reply paid.

Cookie. Sounds like a bust.

Archie [*laughing*]. Bust it is. [*He goes to desk and writes on form.*] "Righto, Graham." There you are, Cookie.

Cookie [*taking it and looking at him pointedly*]. I didn't think you'd last much longer. [*Exit.*]

Archie [*in high spirits*]. Old Wyn by Jove! Haven't seen him since he passed out of Sandhurst. He's been in India with his regiment. I believe they do one deuced well at the Cavalry Club. Is there a train about nine to-morrow morning?

Effie [*who has been standing bolt upright.*] I don't know. I'm not a time table.

Archie [noticing her manner]. Oh, look here. I'll scratch it if you like.

Effie [with a very high head and an almighty scorn]. Oh, please don't. After all, Mr. Winstanley is your friend. You only cram with us.

Archie. What rot! [*He goes to door calling.*] Cookie! Cookie!

Effie [springing up]. No. Let it go.

Archie. Yes, but if . . .

Effie [suddenly putting her hand on his arm]. How long will you be away?

Archie. One day. I ought to go up for other reasons too. I must get some more ties and socks.

Effie [going to chair above fireplace and sitting on the arm]. Ties and socks! You've got hundreds. I don't believe you ever wear the same twice.

Archie [tapping her on the shoulder to enforce attention to his so-called epigram]. You should never rot a man's innocent pleasures. The very moment a really decent sort loses interest in ties and socks, he has become morbid or has committed a felony. [*He is mighty pleased with this. It is quite Bullingdon Club form.*]

Effie. Where's the Cavalry Club?

Archie. In Piccadilly.

Effie. What time will dinner be over?

Archie. About eight o'clock.

Effie [*eagerly*]. Then you can catch the eight thirty and we can go for a walk before bed.

Archie. I should love it, but the thing is, Winstanley talks of a show.

Effie. What is a show?

Archie. The Empire, I suppose, or the Alhambra. [*Sees another chance.*] A soldier never goes to the theatre. It's too childish.

Effie. Then when *will* you be down?

Archie. The last train I'm afraid.

Effie [*rising as though faced with an awful disaster*]. The last train! Then I shan't see you again until . . . when?

Archie. Seven o'clock the day after to-morrow. We'll play our usual eight holes before breakfast. What are you going to do to-morrow?

Effie [*like a kid*]. Be beastly lonely.

Archie [*uncomfortable and yet unaccountably pleased*]. Why? I should have been working all the morning and all the evening.

Effie. Yes, but I should have known that you were in the house. [*She suddenly puts her arms round him passionately.*] Don't go. I can't let you go, Archie!

Archie [*taking her arms away, quickly*].

60 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Don't, for God's sake! [*Turns away and goes to window seat, leaving Effie standing startled. He looks hot and his hand shakes. Enter Harry.*]

Harry [*with great feeling*]. Such a good chap! Such an excellent fellow. The left leg will have to be amputated above the knee. [*Goes to his desk.*] What a lesson in pluck! The first thing he said was "Can I play cricket with a wooden leg?" [*Archie and Effie remain silent. Effie is standing where Archie left her with the same air of startled wonder. Archie has caught up one of his books and is hunting through it. Enter Cookie.*]

Cookie. Fred has sent off the telegram to the 'orspital, sir.

Harry. That's good. If Watkins needs me I shall go up with him to the hospital to-night and sleep in London, so just have my bag packed in case.

Cookie [*with a burst*]. He mustn't need you. Good Lord, 'aven't you got enough . . .

Harry [*gently*]. Please, Cookie.

Cookie [*going out*]. Oh, dear, oh, dear! What with one thing and another.

Harry [*taking up the telegram envelope*]. A telegram! Have you seen this?

Archie. Yes, it's from a pal of mine called

Winstanley. [*Effie turns and leaves the room.*]

Harry [*watching her off*]. Hullo, have you two quarrelled?

Archie [*laughing nervously*]. Good Lord, no! An argument, that's all. [*He continues quickly.*] Winstanley's home on leave. He wants me to meet him to-morrow in London. Is there any objection to my . . .

Harry. No, my dear fellow, of course not. Telegraph and say yes.

Archie. Well, as a matter of fact, I have. I ought to have asked you first. I'm sorry. [*He gives an involuntary chuckle.*]

Harry. Oh, bosh! You've put in some excellent work. You deserve a holiday. [*He sits down at his desk.*] Why won't those men be more careful? A year ago Leech had exactly the same accident. He's been hanging about the village ever since.

Archie. He wants me to lunch and dine.

Harry [*vaguely*]. Lunch and dine. . . . Oh, yes. Well, you will, of course. If I were you I should spend the night in town. It's a nuisance to have to rush for the last train.

Archie. No. Thanks very much. I'll get Cookie to let me have the latchkey. I promise not to make a row.

62 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Harry. Just as you like, old chap. Look into my den and if I'm up we'll have a last pipe. I say, I hope that you and Effie don't squabble?

Archie. Good Lord, no. It was absolutely nothing.

Harry. That's all right. Effie has a very lonely time. It's good for her to be friendly with someone about her own age.

Archie. We're as thick as thieves. [*Enter Cookie.*]

Cookie. Mrs. Lemmins.

Harry [*eagerly*]. And Mary Ann?

Cookie. What *was* Mary Ann. She's so changed I hardly knew her.

Harry. Ask them in . . . Oh, and Cookie, just light the lamp will you? The light has gone out of the sky. It feels like more rain. [*He goes to window and pulls the curtains. Cookie lights lamp.*]

Archie. Well then, I'll disappear.

Harry. If you don't mind, old chap. [*Archie picks up his books and goes out thoughtfully. It is obvious that Effie's sudden embrace has upset him and thrown him headlong. The room is in darkness except for the light which is thrown on the table C. and the chairs on each side of it.*]

Harry. Now then, Cookie. [*Cookie gives an eloquent gesture with her right hand and*

goes off. *Harry walks up and down the room with his hands behind his back until Cookie returns, when he draws up.*]

Cookie. Mrs. Lemmins. [*A square woman, broad of beam, with a large sunburnt face and tightly drawn hair under a large black sun-bonnet enters. She is in a very emotional condition and on the verge of tears.*]

Harry. Come in, Mrs. Lemmins. Come in.

Mrs. L. [*She strides down with creaking boots*]. Mary Ann's a' come 'ome, sir.

Harry. So you said in your note. I'm glad. Where is she?

Mrs. L. Artside, sir. I've gotter few words ter say ter yew. [*She suddenly bursts into tears.*] She won't say 'oo took 'er awiy nor yet where's she bin. 'E deserted 'er some time ago an' I reckon she's bin sellin' fl'ars in London.

Harry. Selling flowers!

Mrs. L. 'Ow she come to find the Albert Edward ai dunno. Reckon she's bin on ther tramp darn ther canal.

Harry. Poor little soul.

Mrs. L. Oh, sir! Ther troubles on 'er nar.

Harry [*in a deep voice*]. Oh, not — that!

Mrs. L. [*weeping harder*]. Yers, sir, and 'er not married.

Harry. This is a bad day. [*Goes to door*

64 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

and opens it.] Come in, Mary Ann. [The light in the hall falls on the pale, pretty, worn face of a young girl. She wears a big hat with a bedraggled feather and a coloured shawl over her shoulders. Her skirt is dusty and dirty and her shoes down at heel. There is a big hole in one of her stockings. She walks in with a half-insolent, half-defiant lurch and a sulky, frightened mouth. She takes no notice of her mother and sits down, as one sits in a dentist's chair. One of her feet lops over and she gives a quick emotional glance round the room of the man who is her god.]

Harry [cheerfully]. Mrs. Lemmins, I should like you to try Cookie's soup. It's very good. You know your way to the kitchen. [He returns to the door and holds it open. Mrs. L. goes out. You can hear her crying down the passage. The door is shut. Harry returns to table and sits opposite to the girl.] Dear little Mary Ann.

Mary Ann [bending forward suddenly, picking up Harry's hand and kissing it]. Oh, I wanted you — Ah! I wanted you, not 'arf I didn't, sir. If it ain't bin because I knewed as 'ow you'd be like this when I come back I should ha' laid down in the canal.

Harry [softly]. My dear child.

Mary Ann [with a sort of laugh]. Ever bin

told as 'ow you was like deep quiet water, sir? . . . There, like me to show thankfulness by bein' saucy, I don't think. Thank you kindly fer seein' me, sir.

Harry. I would have walked a hundred miles to see you.

Mary Ann. Would you truly, sir? . . . Not if you'd known as 'ow you would find me. Mother didn't say in 'er note what I'd done, did she?

Harry. She said that you were in trouble, Mary Ann.

Mary Ann [*with a shrill hysterical note of scorn*]. Yus! That there's the wiy it's always put. It wouldn't be called trouble if I was merried though would it? — and there'd bin orange blossoms and rice and an old shoe!

Harry [*patting her hand*]. My dear little Mary Ann.

Mary Ann [*beginning to cry*]. I wonder you can stand the sight o' me — me as used tar be the good girl o' the school, me as was held up as a model fer the other girls . . . an' yet I don't see as 'ow trouble's the word neither, unless it's for the little un. Jack won't 'ave no trouble. I suppose I shall git over it. It's the little un as'll 'ave all the trouble.

Harry. We'll see to that, Mary Ann. Don't worry.

66 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Mary Ann [*eagerly*]. Will we, sir?

Harry. Why, of course.

Mary Ann [*without any self-pity*]. What's to become o' me?

Harry. You shall come and live here and help Cookie.

Mary Ann. Oh, sir . . . I want the baby something awful. I believe I wanted this baby ever since the diy muvver give me a doll.

Harry. If it's a boy we'll make a fine fellow of him and he shall go into the army.

Mary Ann [*looking straight at the Vicar*]. What'll 'e say ter me when 'e finds art?

Harry. Leave that to me.

Mary Ann [*like one who has handed all responsibility to another*]. I'm glad I come 'ome. Everybody's bin very kind ter me. Many's the glass of milk and 'unk of bread I've 'ad from women with little uns [*in a gossipy way*]. Jack was very good to me, till 'e fell out o' work. But when I took to sellin' fl'ars 'e went on the drink and left me. I waited for 'im fer a long time. Then I thought I'd better try and find the Albert Edward. I used ter sleep under 'aystacks. They did very nicely fer us. I was never frightened o' nights. I 'ad something to whisper to, and to live for. [*A beautiful maternal smile goes all over her face.*]

Harry. Why didn't he marry you, Mary Ann?

Mary Ann. 'E'd got a wife. 'E told me so the day 'e left . . . I was to blame fer this, 'e said.

Harry. You — you! What a coward. You know nothing.

Mary Ann. That's it, sir.

Harry. What do you mean?

Mary Ann. Me knowing nothing.

Harry. I don't understand you.

Mary Ann. 'E explained it all right ter me, sir. Me knowin' nothin' 'e says, and what it all meant, brought it abart. If I'd a bin told when I was old enough to understand I should a sent 'im awiy, 'e says, double quick, and saved 'im and me and the little un from this 'ere. But I'm afraid I'm keepin' you abart, sir.

Harry [*grimly*]. Go on.

Mary Ann [*having a nice bit of news*]. The man ain't built for thinkin', Jack sez. 'E knows, but 'e ain't perfect an' won't let 'isself think. 'E says as 'ow if we was taught ter think and knew as much as the man, there'd be very little of this 'ere trouble fer us. It's the mother first, 'e says, and then us, who is ter blame, never the men.

Harry. My God! [*He springs up.*]

Mary Ann [*nervously*]. I beg pardon, sir?

Harry [*in a sort of amazement*]. Can that brute be right? Can it be that *we* — the mothers and fathers — are partly to blame for this, for *all* such things as this?

Mary Ann. You side with 'im, sir?

Harry. No. I side with you, my poor child, with you against your mother, myself, my wife, all the mothers and fathers and teachers who are answerable to God for the disaster that's happened to you.

Mary Ann. [*The word disaster is too much for her.*] Oh! [*She puts her hands over her face and begins to cry like a little child.*]

Harry [*to himself*]. What have I been doing? . . . [*He turns to Mary Ann.*] Go to the kitchen and have some soup and then go back to the barge with your mother.

Mary Ann [*rising*]. Yes, sir.

Harry [*putting his hands on her shoulders*]. And never forget this. You have friends in this house. When you're ready this roof is yours. Good night, my child.

Mary Ann. Good night, sir. Thank you kindly for seeing me. I'm glad I come 'ome.

Harry. And I'm thankful you did. God bless you. [*He opens the door. Mary Ann goes out slowly. Harry goes to the table, picks up the lamp and carries it to his desk, putting it on the shelf above the books. The light is*

thrown all over the room. Effie's voice is heard suddenly calling "Archie, Archie!" He turns round and stands quite still for a moment. He looks frightened, terribly frightened. He moves irresolutely. He touches things, and then with a sort of fear he goes to the door, opens it and calls.] Helen! Helen!

Mrs. P. Yes.

Harry. Come here, quickly. [He remains by the door. There is a slight pause. Mrs. P. enters. Before the door is closed Effie's laugh rings out in the distance and she is heard calling, "Archie! Archie!"]

Helen [entering and coming L.]. Do you want me, dear?

Harry [gravely and quietly]. Yes. Sit down, darling. I want to speak to you.

Helen [sitting and looking up quickly]. You're upset about something?

Harry [still standing in front of her]. Upset, and humiliated and very worried. [He sits down.] I don't quite know how to begin.

Helen [putting her hand on his]. You and I are partners, dearest. Let me see if I can help you.

Harry [leaning forward and repressing himself with an effort]. It's an amazing thing, Helen, but in all my years of work in London and here, the case of Mary Ann is the only one

which has opened my eyes to the appalling danger of ignorance.

Helen. Ignorance! What makes you think that Mary Ann is ignorant?

Harry. Everything that she has just told me. I've always been led to believe that all the poor wretched Mary Anns of the world have got into trouble, not because they wanted to be immoral but because if they were *not* immoral they were unpopular.

Helen. I'm afraid that's true, Harry. It's a sordid, calculating, knowledgeable affair, frequently winked at by the parents, many of whom are surprised if their girls are married before they get into trouble.

Harry. Yes, to these people the sex problem isn't a problem at all. They recognise facts. Men must be men, they say, and if the girls don't want to be hopelessly neglected they must not be squeamish. Like everybody who comes in contact with the great working class their looseness has appalled me.

Helen [proudly]. Yes, but you have done a *great* work in this village, Harry. You have raised the moral standard of the *men* — the best and only way to protect all these poor girls.

Harry [leading carefully up to his point; he anticipates trouble]. But here we have Mrs. Lemmins, a self-respecting woman, earning

good wages, leading a healthy, hardworking life. Mary Ann has been carefully brought up. *She's* not a slum child reared in the filthy corners of a city. *She's* not a worker in the fields, obliged to rub shoulders with blasphemous and drunken men. Her innocence has been jealously guarded. "No lady's daughter," Mrs. Lemmins used to boast, "need be ashamed to speak to my Mary Ann."

Helen. And she was right, poor old soul. Mary Ann was a model, a perfect model.

Harry [seizing his chance]. A model! A model of what a girl ought not to be? Innocent, yes. But ignorant, no.

Helen. But how can you expect a girl to be innocent if she is not ignorant?

Harry. That's just exactly what I've asked you to come here to tell me. You say that Mary Ann was a model. Look at her now. Helen, why don't we tell our children the truth? Why do we go on hiding behind false modesty and personal cowardice? Why, why are we afraid of looking at the great simple things square in the face?

Helen [waving it aside]. Oh, it's all very difficult, Harry. It's all been argued a thousand times and there's never been any satisfactory result.

Harry [eagerly and quickly]. But why not?

Everything else has progressed and yet in this vital matter we are still prehistoric. Surely the time for puritanism is dead and done with. Surely this persistent attitude of deceiving our girls and of dodging their wondering questions from the utterly mistaken standpoint of clean-mindedness is not for intelligent and humane people. Why do we turn sniggering or shame-faced from youthful questions prompted by an unconscious awakening of the maternal instinct? Why do we drive our ignorant children to such tragedies as poor little Mary Ann will suffer under all her life? God has made the earth incredibly beautiful, but we do nothing to put beauty into the lives of His children. Every day His young things ask their parents the meaning of life. Why don't we tell them, Helen? *Why don't you tell Effie?* [*He throws his bomb and watches his wife keenly.*]

Helen [*a note of amazement and shock in her voice*]. Effie? Tell Effie?

Harry. Yes, darling, Effie. She is very nearly a woman. She has been far more carefully brought up than Mary Ann. She has spent her life almost within the four walls of this house and garden. We have deliberately shielded her against the questions of sex. What might happen to her if she fell in love with some good-looking, unscrupulous boy?

Helen. You mean — Archie?

Harry. No. I mean anyone. We know nothing of Effie's mind on this point. She is seventeen and if she's a healthy girl she has, whether she knows it or not, the maternal instinct.

Helen. Yes, but she is clean minded and good.

Harry. But who's to know that she is strong enough to resist temptation?

Helen. Harry! [*She is absolutely shocked.*]

Harry. Who's to know that nature hasn't punished her by giving her desires as strong as those of men?

Helen [*stiffly*]. Then she will not remain innocent whether she knows the truth or not.

Harry [*leaning forward*]. No, no, no, that's a sweeping assertion, darling, an uncharitable idea. Here and there, of course, there are poor girls to whom morality and innocence mean nothing under the stress of nature. But to ninety-nine out of a hundred virtue means everything, and I say now — I wish with all my soul I'd said it sooner — that a woman who lets her daughter struggle blindly through the awakening years of her womanhood is not fit to be a mother.

Helen [*rising*]. Oh, Harry! [*Going*

across room towards table. She is deeply wounded.]

Harry [follows her and puts his hands on her shoulders]. My dear, I want you to speak to Effie to-night.

Helen. I couldn't — I simply couldn't.

Harry. I ask you to. *Effie might have been Mary Ann!* Think of it!

Helen [with anger and passion and dignity. She looks like a woman fighting a disease]. She *never* could have been Mary Ann, *never*. She is our daughter, *my* daughter. Every day of her life she has been with us, with *me*. Do atmosphere and environment count for nothing? What is the use of all our teaching and example if she is to be treated as one of these poor girls from whom nothing can be hidden? She is pure of heart and mind. At the right moment the maternal instinct will come to her, as it comes to all carefully brought up girls. Let her be free from all that side of life as long as she can. [*More quietly.*] Besides, Harry, it isn't done. We don't tell these things to our girls. My mother never told me. She didn't want me to know. She was all against the discussion of these terribly personal matters with young unmarried girls. I found out the truth for myself. Effie must do the same. [*She*

says this in a low voice as though she were in church.]

Harry [quietly but with emotion]. Darling, Effie might have been Mary Ann. Mrs. Lemmins never thought of telling her the truth. Look at her now. No man can say what he will do under temptation. No woman can say what she may do in ignorance. Effie might have been Mary Ann. Think of it.

Helen. I can't think of it. It's altogether unthinkable.

Harry [with a touch of anger]. But *I* think of it. I *must* think of it. And I ask you this. I ask you, for Effie's sake, and for my sake, and for *your* sake, to forget what your mother did, and all these other refined women do, and face this question fearlessly.

Helen. I . . . can't!

Harry [turns away and goes quickly back to armchair L., wheels round and stops C.]. Helen, you and I have never had a harsh word since we knew each other. It will be a black day if ever we do. For God's sake, don't drive me into anger over what is one of the most vital questions that has ever come into our lives. Effie's happiness and safety are in our hands. Are you going to be brave enough to do something that isn't done — are you going to rise

76 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

above a horrible and dangerous convention and put yourself to the distress and discomfort of speaking to Effie — or will you leave it to *me*? [*There is a threat in his voice.*]

Helen [*frightened*]. Harry!

Harry. Effie might have been Mary Ann. Answer me! [*He brings the weight of his whole personality against her. She stands irresolute, nervously twisting her fingers. Now she stands up stiffly. The child is hers.*]

Helen [*reluctantly*]. I . . . I will tell her. [*She is even more frightened at hearing her own statement, puts out her arms, gives a sob and goes quickly to the man whom she loves more than life. Harry wraps her in his arms.*]

[*Curtain.*]

ACT III

Two mornings later at half-past six.

The Scene is laid in Archie's bedroom. It is a square room lined with wood from floor to ceiling. Door down R. Above door running close to wall a narrow wooden bedstead, the bed unslept upon. At back two windows between which is a high chest of drawers on which there is a looking-glass, L. C. There is a fireplace. Above fireplace deep cupboards. On each side of the fireplace are cane deck chairs with cushions in them. The floor is carpeted with a worn turkey carpet especially worn in front of the chest of drawers.

Both windows have rather deep window seats. In front of the one R. there is a shaving stand. On the other window seat are arranged half a dozen pairs of shoes for golf, tennis and ordinary wear and beneath the window seat there are a number of pairs of boots, all jacked.

From hooks on door are hanging flannel trousers, white and grey. Over the end of

bed and over all the backs of chairs there are clothes. There is a little old-fashioned sofa in front of fireplace and on this are heaped shirts, socks, stockings, waistcoats, braces, etc. The whole appearance of the room is irresistibly untidy, comfortable and cheerful.

The walls are closely hung with framed photos of college groups, and Eights, and over the mantelpiece suspended from a brass rod is hanging an oar, on the blade of which the names and weights of an Eight are painted. A line of books stands on the mantelpiece. Stowed away in corners there are leather shirt cases, kit bags and trunks.

The windows are open and a honeysuckle climbs round the outsides of them. The sun pours into the room. The curtain rises on an empty stage.

[After a pause the door is opened quietly and Archie enters, carrying a shirt case. He wears a straw hat tilted and is dressed in a suit of dark flannels. He looks merry and bright. He shuts the door carefully, puts the shirt case on the sofa, undoes it and unpacks. As he takes out his evening clothes, opera hat and dress shoes, and hangs them in the wardrobe, he whistles

softly. Now he takes out a large collection of new ties and eyes them with pride. The door opens quietly and Harry enters in his shirt sleeves with a brush in each hand.]

Archie [turning with a smile]. Good morning, sir.

Harry [surprised]. Hullo, you're up early. I expected to find you with your mouth open, snoring like a grampus . . . but what's this? You haven't been to bed!

Archie. No. I've only just got here.

Harry [sharply]. How's that?

Archie [glibly]. It was . . . awful bad luck. Winstanley had a touch of fever last night, so after the show I went back with him to his room in Bury Street and sat with him.

Harry [heartily]. Good for you, my dear fellow. How on earth did you get down so early?

Archie [frowning deeply and looking as though he hated himself]. I caught a workman's train.

Harry. But you must be frightfully tired.

Archie. No. I'm all right, thanks.

Harry [turning round]. Turn in and have a sleep. I'll tell Cookie not to call you till eleven. That'll be better than nothing.

80 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Archie. Oh, rather not. I'm not a bit sleepy. Besides I'm playing golf with Effie at seven.

Harry. Just as you like. [*Goes to looking-glass and brushes his hair.*] Oh, for the glad days when I was twenty-one . . . I often use this glass when you're asleep.

Archie. But aren't you up earlier than usual, sir?

Harry. Just a bit. I'm going down to the barge to see little Mary Ann, poor little soul. Her baby was born last night. It was dead.

Archie [*involuntarily*]. Oh, I'm sorry.

Harry [*solemnly*]. Who can say whether one is to be sorry or glad? Her mother calls it the child of sin. I don't think that God will call it by such a name. . . . Well, it's a grand morning for golf, but stick on your thickest shoes, the dew is very heavy. [*He goes towards door.*]

Archie [*quickly*]. May I keep you a second, sir. I want to tell you something.

Harry. Not now, old man, after breakfast. Mrs. Lemmins is waiting for me. [*Exit.*]

Archie [*eagerly*]. But . . . [*the door shuts*]. Oh, God, why did I say it? [*He sits down in chair above fireplace in an attitude of hopeless depression. Enter Cookie.*]

Cookie. Well, you're a nice one, I don't think.

Archie. I don't think so either.

Cookie. I met him on the stairs and he told me as 'ow you'd only just got back. What d'you do? Miss the last train?

Archie. Yes.

Cookie. Did you sleep at the hotel at Paddington?

Archie. No. I went home.

Cookie. Well, from the sound of you, you don't seem to 'ave put in a very good time.

Archie. Oh, I put in a good enough time.

Cookie. Too good praps. Dessay you're feelin' a bit blawsy.

Archie. What's that?

Cookie [*surprised*]. French for a whisky 'ead.

Archie [*bending forward and putting his head between his hands*]. No.

Cookie. My mistake [*examines him with keen sympathy*]. What's the matter?

Archie. Nothing's the matter.

Cookie. Tell me another. You've got something or other pretty bad. 'Ave a cupper tea, dear. [*The mother feeling is in her voice.*]

Archie. No, thanks, *Cookie*. I'll wait for breakfast.

Cookie. Just as you fancy but it won't take

me a jiffy to get you one. Come on, you may as well. You look tired.

Archie. You're awfully kind Cookie, but I'd rather wait. Don't let me keep you from getting one for the Vicar. He's up frightfully early this morning.

Cookie. Yus, and 'e went to bed frightfully late last night. Kep' up most of it by Mary Ann down at the barge. 'E don't get a legitimate night's rest once in six. If I was the missus I'd strap 'im down to his bed. All the troubles in the world can be seen to in twelve hours of daylight, I say. Come on now, 'ave a nice cupper tea, Mr. Archie.

Archie. For heaven's sake don't bother about me.

Cookie [*hurt and going towards door*]. All right, all right, all right. Keep yer 'air on. [*She stops and turns, filled with something more than curiosity. The boy's attitude worries her. She means to get to the bottom of it.*] I suppose you're playin' gowf as usual along o' Miss Effie?

Archie. No. I'm not in the mood for it.

Cookie [*returning from door*]. 'Ave a few words with yer father yesterday?

Archie. No, I didn't see my father.

Cookie. Oh, then you backed an 'orse and went down.

Archie. Didn't have a bet.

Cookie. Then you're sickening for something.

Archie. No. I'm as fit as a fiddle.

Cookie [*taking up dress trousers and folding them carefully, eyeing him all the time*]. I've got it.

Archie. Got what?

Cookie [*triumphantly*]. Yus, I've got it. You're in love.

Archie [*simply*]. I've been in love for weeks.

Cookie. Ah!

Archie. But as I've no right to be, I just recognise the fact as I recognise that the sun sets and the moon rises and leave it at that. I'm worried. Damnably worried, but not about that.

Cookie [*very sympathetically*]. Poor boy. I can lend you two pound sixteen if that's any good.

Archie [*gets up and puts his hand on her shoulder*]. Thank you, Cookie. You're a Briton, but it isn't money. [*Goes over to the shaving stand.*]

Cookie. Well, then, I give it up. If it ain't love and it ain't money, and it ain't illness, what in the name of all that's wonderful, is it?

Archie [*with a burst*]. It's the devil.

84 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Cookie. Oh-h! It's 'im, is it? All I can suggest is that you 'ave an 'eart to 'eart with the Vicar. What 'e don't know about the devil, isn't worth knowing. I shall get you a cupper tea for all that. Something warm in the tummy always disconcerts old Nick. [*She goes out. Archie gets up, walks about the room for a moment and then goes to dressing table and leans on it with his back to audience. Enter Harry.*]

Harry. Have you got any money, old fellow? I hadn't time to cash a cheque yesterday, and poor Mrs. Lemmins is without funds. I suddenly remembered and came back.

Archie [turning]. How much do you want, sir? I've only got three sovereigns.

Harry. That'll do splendidly. Thanks very much.

Archie [taking out his money]. It's just short of three pounds.

Harry. Never mind. It'll do for the time being. There are things to get for Mary Ann. [*He takes it.*] Thanks.

Archie [going to door and putting his back to it, his face is set and drawn]. You've got to know something.

Harry [surprised at the boy's tone]. Is anything the matter?

Archie. I lied to you just now.

Harry. Did you, why?

Archie. Because I've been trained to lie and I haven't broken myself of the habit. I forgot that I wasn't talking to one of the men who wouldn't believe me if I told the truth. If I had said that I didn't come down last night because I missed my train, I should have been called a liar by them. They would have suspected me of some rot, so from force of habit I was afraid to tell the simple truth and invented Win's fever. [*He takes several steps towards Harry.*] Hit me in the face, knock me down, hurt me vilely. I want you to.

Harry [*going over to sofa and pretending to examine the lock of the shirt case*]. Old boy, have you ever been to Westminster Abbey?

Archie. Yes.

Harry. Have you wondered how long and arduously men must have worked to build up that gorgeous place?

Archie. Yes.

Harry. You've been trying to build up an Abbey before you've laid all the foundation stones. . . . An excellent shirt case this. Holds a lot too. . . . See what I mean?

Archie [*after a pause*]. But have I laid any foundation stones at all?

Harry. Several of the most important, and

86 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

better still you know which one you haven't laid. [*He crosses to Archie and puts his arm round his shoulder.*] Go easy, my dear lad. Give yourself time. The stucco building, the imitation affair that you were made to put up by your silly fool architects is demolished. Don't be afraid. Don't press. Don't try and make records. I'll back you to win after you've trained a bit more.

Archie. Then you . . . you don't despise me for this? You won't let this affair ever make you suspect me?

Harry. My dear fellow, I'm your friend, not your taskmaster or drill sergeant. I go through every day what you've just been going through, and I thank God for it. It's my only chance of ever becoming all I hope to be. A man's reach must exceed his grasp or what's a Heaven for?

Archie [*trying not to break down*]. You're . . . you're most awfully kind.

Harry [*realising this and becoming casual*]. It was very kind of you to have told me. [*He counts the money in his hand.*] Two pounds, eighteen and seven pence. You shall have it back this afternoon. Make the most of this gorgeous morning. [*Harry holds his hand out to Archie. Archie makes a dart at it and grips it. Harry turns and goes out. Archie heaves*

a sigh of relief, remains where he is for a moment, then goes to window.]

Archie [waving his hand]. So long, sir. *[He takes off his coat and waistcoat, picks up the handle of the exerciser which is screwed to the wall above sofa and exercises vigorously. Enter Cookie with a cup of tea on a tray which also contains bread and butter and radishes.]*

Cookie. Ah! That's the way. Punch him in the neck. Put both your fistesses in his wind. The devil 'ates 'ealthiness. *[She goes off into one of her shrill screams of laughter.]*

Archie [laughing and continuing to exercise]. You are a persistent old female.

Cookie. Persistent me foot! And as to being old, I'm in the first flush of giddy youth. . . . Now as to sugar, is it one or two?

Archie. Two.

Cookie. That's all right. Where will you have it?

Archie. Put it on the bed, Cookie.

Cookie. It's the only tidy place in the room. I can't keep you straight. Don't let it get cold. *[She goes to door having put the tray on the bed.]*

Archie. Thanks, most awfully. You're one in a million.

Cookie. Now you'd better take advantage of the sun. It'll rain before you can say knife.

88 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Archie. Not it. There was no ring round the moon last night.

Cookie. Can't 'elp no ring round the moon. What about my poor feet? [*Exit. Archie continues to exercise. After a pause the door opens and Effie enters with a scarlet dressing gown over her nightdress. Her feet are bare.*]

Effie. It is you then! I woke up suddenly and thought I heard you.

Archie [*dropping the exerciser with a clatter*]. How long will you be before you're ready?

Effie. Ready for what?

Archie. Nine holes.

Effie [*skips on to the bed*]. Oh, there's heaps of time. I want to hear all your news.

Archie [*hurriedly and uneasily*]. Why not wait till we're on the links?

Effie [*laughing*]. [*She looks angelic and all flushed from sleep.*] Two reasons. There's no need and I don't want to.

Archie. I'd ever so much rather you did.

Effie [*airily*]. I can't help your troubles. You gave me a horribly lonely day, and kept me up half the night. You must pay for these things by doing what I want you to do.

Archie. I kept you up half the night . . . how?

Effie. Well, you don't suppose I was going

to let you come in without hearing all the details of your day, do you? I waited here till I fell asleep. It was four o'clock when I went to my own room.

Archie [gasping]. You waited here?

Effie. Yes. Of course I did. Where else could I wait?

Archie [more and more uneasy, but all on fire with her loveliness]. I say, Cookie says it's going to rain. For goodness' sake go and get up.

Effie. May I have a drop of your tea? It looks good.

Archie. Have it all.

Effie. No, we'll go halves. [*She drinks from the cup and hands it to Archie.*] Here you are.

Archie [taking cup and putting it on dressing table]. You're evidently not going to play this morning, then.

Effie. I shan't stir an inch until you give me an account of everything that you've done from the very beginning. Have you noticed all the changes since you've been away?

Archie. Yes.

Effie. No, you haven't. I'm certain that you passed the rose trees in the front without looking at them. They've got a magnificent new rose apiece.

90 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Archie. Really?

Effie. And did you catch sight of those darling sweet peas in the old tree trunks by the gate? Dozens of new blooms since you went away, simply dozens. And I picked an armful yesterday afternoon. The more you pick the more you may. Do you know what I think about sweet peas?

Archie [*obviously fascinated by the girl's appearance*]. No, what?

Effie. Well, I've discovered that a sweet pea is different from all other flowers. It's not a bit cocky and puffed up about its bloom. Its one ambition in life is to bloom quickly, if possible somewhere where it can't be seen, and then hurry for all its worth into pod. Since I've found that out I hate picking it. It does seem so cruel to stop it from doing what it wants to do so awfully much. Don't you think so?

Archie [*going to door and listening*]. Yes.

Effie. I don't believe you heard a word I said.

Archie. Yes, I did.

Effie. What did I say?

Archie. You said you loved picking sweet peas because that's the only thing they care about.

Effie [*bursts out laughing*]. Oh, that's good.

Archie [*intensely uncomfortable, shutting the door*]. Not so loud.

Effie. Yes, I mustn't wake mother up. She was very tired last night.

Archie. We shan't get nine holes unless you hurry up.

Effie. Very well then, we shan't. I do wish you would sit down for five minutes.

Archie. I thought you wanted to know about my yesterday's doings. You're talking about everything else under the sun.

Effie. Well, shall I tell you the truth?

Archie [*strongly*]. Yes, for God's sake do . . . always.

Effie [*eyeing him*]. You *are* in a queer mood to-day.

Archie. No, I'm not. I'm all right.

Effie. Well, I don't take a vast interest in anything you did yesterday if you *must* know.

Archie. Why not?

Effie. Because I wanted you here. I hated your going away.

Archie. I wish I hadn't gone.

Effie. Do you wish you hadn't gone because I didn't want you to go, or because you didn't have a good time?

Archie. Oh, I suppose I put in a good enough time. . . . Listen!

Effie. It's only Cookie. Call her in and

92 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

ask her for some more tea. [*Skips back on to the bed. Her dressing gown is open and all the lace about her neck can be seen.*]

Archie. No, no.

Effie. Well, did you get your socks and ties?

Archie. Yes. [*He cannot help looking at her. She fascinates and allures him with fearful unconsciousness.*]

Effie. How many?

Archie. A dozen of both. [*He is drawn towards her. He can hardly keep his hands off her.*]

Effie. A dozen! I don't believe father has had as many as a dozen in his life. Did you find your friend much changed?

Archie. Old Win? Rather. I hardly knew him. I should have passed him if I'd seen him in the street.

Effie. What's happened to him then?

Archie. India and — and the Service. From being a man of some individuality he's developed into a type.

Effie. You liked him . . . as much as before?

Archie. When I found him . . . or rather the remains of him. Really and truly talking to him was like talking to a regiment, not a man. I felt that all his brother officers an-

swered when he answered. He had a most curious effect on me. [*Archie has fallen under the girl's spell and his horrible uneasiness at her presence in his room is forgotten for the time being.*]

Effie. Did he, what?

Archie. Well thinking back, I'm perfectly certain I was afraid to be myself and gradually became him.

Effie. How?

Archie. I mean I became a cavalryman too for the time.

Effie. How *do* you become a cavalryman?

Archie [*with a laugh*]. You stiffen your back, arm and legs, and make your tongue very heavy, check any desire you may have either to tell anything or ask anything and think hard about good form. It's not easy for a civilian.

Effie. I can't imagine you passing for five minutes as a cavalryman. Did you have to put up with dear Win all day?

Archie. No. In the evening we dined with two ladies.

Effie [*slightly jealous*]. Ladies? Who were they?

Archie. A mother who was just old enough to be a daughter and a daughter who was almost old enough to be a mother.

94 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Effie. I know. We've got two of them down here. Dull Bright and Bright Dull.

Archie. Don't ask me to meet them.

Effie. I won't. What theatre did you go to?

Archie. Gaiety. Very bright and idiotic. [*His manner changes to great fright.*] Someone's coming. For God's sake go.

Effie. Let them come. I don't mind. I suppose I can be here if I like, can't I?

Archie [*angrily*]. No, you can't. You've no right to be here. Will you go?

Effie [*rising*]. Not until I've told you something. I think you might have written to me. It's awful to be so lonely.

Archie. But how *could* I write? I came back before any letter could have been delivered.

Effie. You ought to have written before you left. I could have kept your letter with me all day. It would have been better than nothing. Archie, don't go away again. Don't leave me alone again. I can't bear it. If you love me you must think of me. [*She speaks quietly, but in a voice that trembles with immense emotion.*]

Archie [*catching her in his arms*]. I do love you. I adore you.

Effie [*looking up into his face*]. And I love

you. I shall always love you. You're everything in the world to me. Archie! Archie!

Archie. My darling. [*He kisses her again and again.*] But go now. This is not the time for seeing you.

Effie. Not the time? Why not?

Archie. You'll catch your death.

Effie [*with a little laugh, clinging to him*]. Death, with you come back? Why are you pushing me away? Don't push me away.

Archie. Presently. [*He suddenly frees himself, takes the girl by the arm and rushes her across the room, opens the cupboard of the wardrobe, pushes her in and shuts it. There is a tap at the door. Archie stands in the middle of room, frightfully agitated.*] Who is it?

Mrs. P. [*without*]. It is I, may I come in?

Archie [*in a hoarse whisper to Effie*]. Stay where you are. Don't move. [*Goes to door and opens it.*] Good morning.

Mrs. P. [*entering*]. Good morning. Cookie tells me that you came down by a workman's train. Aren't you very tired? [*She goes to the window and tidies the curtain.*]

Archie. No, not a bit, thanks.

Mrs. P. Well at any rate I see you've had tea.

96 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Archie. Yes. Cookie insisted. I was just going to change.

Mrs. P. Golf this morning?

Archie. Yes, that's the notion.

Mrs. P. Effie is getting up, if she isn't already out.

Archie. Oh, that's good. If you see her will you tell her that I shan't be five minutes?

Mrs. P. Did you have a nice day?

Archie. Very, thanks.

Mrs. P. I'm so glad. We all missed you very much. The house seemed quite different without you.

Archie. I'm glad to be back.

Mrs. P. [*going out*]. It's a lovely morning. [*The instant she has left the room Archie shuts the door, goes quickly to the wardrobe and throws it open.*]

Archie. Go to your room at once! Do you hear?

Effie [*with a blaze of anger*]. I'll go to my room when I'm ready, not a moment before.

Archie. If you don't go now, I'll go.

Effie. Why should I go? I've not finished speaking to you yet.

Archie. If you've got anything more to say come down with me to your mother's room and say it before her.

Effie [*stamping her foot*]. I won't.

What's the good of that. I can see you before people any time. That's what I'm so sick of. I want to speak to you alone and I will. [*She throws her arms round his neck.*]

Archie [*flinging her off*]. Don't do that again. I can't stand it. [*Effie bursts into a passion of tears and flings herself on her knees at the side of the bed*].

Archie. Oh, God! [*He bends down over her and tries to pick her up.*] Darling . . . , darling.

Effie [*sobbing*]. It's no use. It's too late . . . it's too late.

Archie. How d'you mean? . . . too late?

Effie. You don't love me. You hate me.

Archie. I don't love you. . . . You don't know what you are saying. [*The boy is shaking all over.*]

Effie. I *do* know. I know that you loathe me. I sicken you. You slip away whenever you see me coming. I can't even take your arm without making you shudder. Do you think I can't see? Do you think I go about as blind as a bat? What's the matter with me? What have I done to you?

Archie. Effie.

Effie [*springing up*]. Tell me. Tell me. . . . I must know. . . . I must. It's . . . killing me. Can't you see that it's killing me?

98 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Archie [putting his arms round her]. Oh, my dear.

Effie. Oh, Archie, Archie, I love you. I love you. I love you more than life, more than my father and mother, more than I know and *you* love me. You *do* love me. You'll always love me. You can't help it any more than I can. I know that. I am happy about that. That's most awfully good. But what hurts me more than I can bear is the new way you have of keeping away from me, for your work. I want you to work. I want you to do big things, but I don't want you to love work more than you love me. I'm . . . Oh, I'm too frightfully jealous of everything that keeps you away from me. I must have something of you. I must feel your arms round me sometimes to keep me alive. If you told me that you had been keeping out of my way because you don't love me, I should laugh. It isn't possible for you not to love me. You're doing it for some other reason and I'm going to know it now. [*Enter Harry.*]

Harry [cheerfully]. I say, Archie . . . [*he draws up. As he sees the two young people a look of terror comes into his face*].

Archie [under his breath, recoiling from *Effie*]. Good God!

Effie [still emotional but speaking simply and

without any alarm]. Good morning, Father.

Harry [*hoarsely to Effie*]. Go to your room.

Effie [*surprised*]. Father!

Harry [*louder and sternly*]. Go to your room! [*Effie looks wonderingly from one man to the other, turns and goes quietly out unashamed and unselfconscious. Nothing is said until the door closes.*]

Archie [*bursting out*]. I swear to you . . .

Harry. Shut the door. [*Archie does so.*] Come here. [*Archie obeys orders. He stands up straight and fearless looking straight at Harry. Harry's lips are set tight. His nostrils are distended. He looks like a man whose blood is surging with rage and indignation, but who is fighting hard to remain master of himself.*] What was my daughter doing in your room?

Archie. Saying good morning.

Harry. Did you call her in?

Archie [*after hesitation*]. No.

Harry. Do you mean to tell me that she came in on her own account?

Archie [*after further hesitation*]. Yes.

Harry. Is it the usual thing for you and my daughter to make free of each other's rooms?

Archie. No, sir.

Harry [*blazing*]. Tell me the truth.

Archie. I am telling the truth.

Harry. Will you swear to me that Effie has never been into your bedroom before, either at night, or in the early morning?

Archie [*unhesitatingly*]. Yes.

Harry. I don't believe you. . . . I can't believe you. You lied to me once. How can I rely on your speaking the truth now?

Archie [*staggered*]. What! . . . But I give you my word of honour.

Harry [*unable to control himself*]. Honour? Honour? What sort of honour is yours that allows you to live in the house of a man whose implicit trust you have won, and tempt his daughter into your bedroom?

Archie [*passionately*]. You have no right to say that. I ought not to have let Effie come in, but we love each other and . . .

Harry. You love each other?

Archie. Yes.

Harry. And what then?

Archie. It's perfectly natural that we should like saying a few words alone. It's all my fault and I'm sorry. But you've no right to doubt my word when I tell you that Effie only came in to hear what I'd done yesterday.

Harry [*seizing the boy's shoulders*]. I don't want to doubt your word. I'd give a year of

my life to believe you, but you lied to me once already this morning.

Archie [*twisting away: hurt to the soul*]. Once . . . once! I told you why I lied to you then. I told you because you made me think that you'd never suspect me as all the others have done. But you *do* suspect me . . . even *you*.

Harry. Yes, yes. I do suspect you. I must suspect you. Thinking that I am out of the house, you call Effie into your room out of her bed.

Archie. I didn't call her.

Harry. Tell me the truth.

Archie [*like a wounded animal*]. I *have* told you the truth, but only half of it. Now you shall have it all. You deserve it. You may call me a liar if you like. What does it matter? No one will see me in East Brenton again after this morning as long as I live. [*He chokes.*]

Harry [*still angry but with a note of fear in his voice*]. Go on.

Archie [*in a dull voice*]. Effie waited in my room from twelve o'clock last night until four o'clock this morning. She came into it again this morning when she heard me come back.

Harry. Was she hiding when I found you unpacking?

Archie. No.

Harry. You are lying.

Archie [*shivering as though struck by a whip*]. Very well then, I'm lying. It's no good telling you the truth. But listen to this. She came in directly you'd gone. She was in the room when Mrs. Pemberton came in. I hid her in the cupboard.

Harry. Why? . . . If you had nothing to be ashamed of?

Archie. Because I wanted to protect Effie.

Harry. You ask me to believe that?

Archie [*shouting and on the verge of a breakdown*]. I ask you to believe nothing. I don't care now what you choose to believe. I'm just telling you the truth to show you what I might have done because no one has seen fit to tell Effie that she is a woman.

Harry [*furious*]. You prove yourself to be lying and to be trying to shield yourself behind Effie by saying that. Effie *has* been told that she is a woman and what it means.

Archie [*with a cry*]. Oh, no. That's impossible. You may think that she's been told but she hasn't. Good God, do you know what you imply by saying that she's been told? . . . I can't say it. I can't even think it.

Harry. Say it . . . say it!

Archie. You imply that Effie was not ignorant but was tempting me.

Harry [springing at the boy]. How dare you! *[He shakes him and flings him away. Archie staggers against the door. He gathers himself up and points a shaking finger at Harry.]*

Archie [thickly and passionately]. Blame yourself for this. Blame your wife. Effie never knew what she was doing. She knows nothing. If I hadn't adored her and hadn't been trying for all I was worth to play the game for your sake, I should have gone to *her* room before to-day and I should have locked my door this morning. I wanted to. . . . Oh, my God, how I wanted to! . . . and she wanted to stay although she didn't know why. If she had stayed we should not have been to blame. *You* would,—you and your wife. . . . Good-bye. You send me straight to hell. *[He gives a great cry and lurches to the door, opens it, goes out and slams it behind him. Harry remains standing upright, rigid.]*

[*Curtain.*]

ACT IV

[*Harry's den. No time has passed between the fall of the curtain on the last Act and its rise on this one. The sun is streaming into the windows. Cookie, on her knees, is polishing the floor with beeswax. She is singing softly to herself. The song is comic. Collins passes the window which is open from R. to L.*]

Collins [patronisingly]. Morning, Cookie.

Cookie. Oh, 'ow you made me jump!

Collins [who has disappeared and returned and is now leaning on the window sill]. Want to know anything fer to-day, old lady?

Cookie. Old yerself! What d'yer mean?

Collins. Well, have yer fergot that it's the Hascot gold cup?

Cookie. What, again?

Collins. What d'yer mean, again?

Cookie. Well, it only seems three weeks ago that you took my two bob, put it on Bonnie Lad and told me I'd gone down. Lord, 'ow time flies!

Collins. I'm artsin' you about 'orse racin'

not philosophy. You know young Halbert Honor?

Cookie. 'Im as looks after the 'osses of the gent with the swivel eye?

Collins. That's 'im. Well, 'is brother is in a racing stable and 'e sent Halbert a postcard tellin' 'im to put 'is shirt on "Father Stephen."

Cookie. If Albert chooses to 'and his underclothing to a bookmaker, there's no reason why I should.

Collins. Don't you be 'asty. This is the best thing in racing.

Cookie [*rubbing energetically*]. They all are until you see 'em sixth in the stop press. Don't you try and seduce me, Freddy.

Collins [*with a loud laugh*]. Not 'arf! I've 'ad some! Now look 'ere, go 'alves with me in five bob to win.

Cookie. What should I lose? Five bob?

Collins. You don't know much about 'rithmetic.

Cookie. Maybe. But I know a good deal about Fred Collins.

Collins [*touchily*]. 'Ere, are we talkin' sense or not?

Cookie. Not! You go and cut some luttuses for breakfast and leave 'orse racing ter mugs.

Collins. Put the money on nar at six ter one termorrer mornin' after lunch we divide a matter of thirty bob. 'Aven't yer got no use for fifteen shillings?

Cookie. 'Alf a crown at the bottom of my pocket is worth six 'alf crowns still running.

Collins. All right. 'Ave it yer own way. Don't say I never give yer a chanst. [*Enter Mrs. Pemberton.*]

Mrs. P. Good morning, Cookie.

Cookie. Good morning, mum.

Mrs. P. Good morning, Collins.

Collins [*speciously*]. Good morning to you, mum. I was just tellin' Cook as 'ow I can get 'er a nice dish of vegetable marrers.

Cookie. Liar! [*She coughs to hide the remark.*]

Mrs. P. That will be very nice, Collins. I thought I saw some in the garden about a week ago.

Collins. Ah, but the frost nipped them off.

Cookie. Frost!

Mrs. P. Oh, and tell me, Fred, we ought not to be running short of peas already, surely.

Collins. Well, mum, you see it's like this. Last year was wet and there was only four mouths in the 'ouse. Consequence was peas panned out well. Now this year we've 'ad a superabundance of sun and Mr. Archibald — I

don't know whether you've noticed it, mum, but that Mr. Archibald 'e's a wonder for peas.

Mrs. P. I see, Fred.

Cookie. Do yer?

Collins. And don't forget to take this into account, mum. The walls of this place is low, and there's lots of thieves about.

Cookie. Ah!

Mrs. P. Oh, but no one would steal from *this* garden.

Collins. Well, mum, you'd think not, but where a nice line o' Marrerfats is concerned 'uman nature is very frail. I make no accusations but I lay down the 'int. [*Cookie chuckles. Collins leans forward aggressively eyeing her hotly.*] Eh?

Cookie [*innocently*]. Eh?

Collins. Oh, I thought you spoke.

Cookie. Me? Oh, lor no.

Mrs. P. Thank you, Collins.

Collins. Thank you, mum. [*He looks at Cookie and his lips move silently. He goes off.*]

Mrs. P. [*with a smile*]. He has a large family, but he's a good workman.

Cookie. The wheelbarrers of stuff that goes out of this place before any of us is abart. . . .

Mrs. P. [*dusting the room*]. We don't know that, Cook.

Cookie. No, but we guess it, and we 'ear the barrer.

Mrs. P. After all, this is a large garden, and the temptation to take things home is very great, and Fred's family is a growing one.

Cookie. Remarkable 'ow well it grows on our vegetables. Mind, I'm not saying 'e's a thief.

Mrs. P. Ah! I'm glad you're doing the floors, Cookie. They wanted it badly.

Cookie. Since that boy came with 'is golf nails, 'e's played old jimmy with these 'ere floors. But there! 'E's a nice young feller and I can spare him a little elbow grease.

Mrs. P. But you're using beeswax, aren't you?

Cookie. Can't you smell it?

Mrs. P. Oh, and Cook! Before I forget it, I want to ask you about the airing of the clothes.

Cookie [*on the defensive*]. What about it?

Mrs. P. Well, I went into Mr. Archie's room yesterday when he was away, and I saw that somehow or other the wash basket with all his clean things had found its way to his room. I don't think that they had been hanging in front of the kitchen fire at all.

Cookie. They hadn't.

Mrs. P. Oh, Cookie! You know how care-

ful one ought to be, and how easy it is to get pneumonia.

Cookie. Well, I was going to put 'im at the bottom of his shelves so that by the time they'd worked 'emselves up to the top, they'd a been aired automatic. It's the latest thing.

Mrs. P. If you don't mind, Cookie, I think that we'll remain old-fashioned.

Cookie. Well, just as you like, mum. I only tried to move with the times.

Mrs. P. [*polishing a silver cup*]. There! I forgot to order the tea from the stores yesterday for my old women.

Cookie. Go on forgetting, mum. Your old women, unbeknownst to you, exchanges those packets of tea for tots of gin.

Mrs. P. [*virtuously indignant*]. Cook! I've never heard you say anything so uncharitable!

Cookie. Well, mum, facts is facts, you know, call 'em what you like, and after all said and done, I shouldn't be surprised if the gin was better for 'em than the tea.

Mrs. P. [*very carefully dusting mantelpiece*]. We may as well settle about dinner now, Cookie.

Cookie [*rising and standing in a judicial attitude by the table C*]. The important question of the day.

Mrs. P. What did we have on Monday?

110 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Cookie. Mutton, 'ot for dinner, cold for Tuesday's lunch.

Mrs. P. And what did we have for Tuesday's dinner?

Cookie. Ribs of beef 'ot. Cold for to-day's luncheon.

Mrs. P. And to-day's Thursday. Let us see if we can't think of something quite original, *Cookie*.

Cookie. Something for a change, eh?

Mrs. P. Yes, something for a change.

Cookie. Well, then, let's 'ave 'ot mutton to-night and a nice bit of beef to-morrow night.

. . .

Mrs. P. Oh, the eternal round of mutton and beef. [*She laughs.*] Very well, *Cook*, mutton and beef then. We ought to be very thankful to get them.

Cookie. Mr. Archie don't mind what 'e eats. The Vicar never knows. Miss Effie, when she don't like the meat, makes it up on pudding, and you and me just eat ter live, so it ain't a difficult 'ouse to cater for.

Mrs. P. What door was that banging?

Cookie. Mr. Archie's, I should think.

Mrs. P. I've never heard him bang his door before.

Cookie. 'E's in a mood this morning. Goin' to London yesterday unsettled 'im. Oh,

ACT IV

III

lor, my kettle. [*She darts out of the room. Mrs. P. goes to window, straightens the cushions in the window seat and leans out.*]

Mrs. P. [*to Bill, who is unseen*]. Bill! How often have you been told not to bury your bones at the feet of the rose trees. . . . No, no! don't dig it up again. Leave it there now. Why bury it at all? There's no other dog in the place. [*Enter Cookie.*]

Cookie. All over my clean grate.

Mrs. P. I'm afraid I kept you about, Cookie. I'm sorry. Now for the drawing-room. Is Miss Effie down yet?

Cookie. 'Aven't seen nothing of her. [*Mrs. P. goes out.*]

Cookie [*going to window*]. Freddie! . . . [*She whistles.*]

Collins [*off*]. 'Ullo!

Cookie. A nice cupper tea ready for you.

Collins [*off*]. I'm a comin'. [*Cookie waits at window until Collins appears.*]

Cookie. Fred!

Collins. Eh?

Cookie. I'll go 'alf a crown with you on that 'orse. 'Ascot comes but once a year.

Collins. Good for you.

Cookie. I tell you what it is, Fred. 'Aving lived twenty years in a vicarage makes one feel regular reckless at times. [*Enter Harry. He*

112 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

comes in slowly, with a set, stern face. On his entrance Fred disappears and Cookie pretends to be busy. Harry goes to fireplace and stands with his back to it.]

Cookie. A lovely morning, sir. [Harry makes no reply. Cookie darts a quick look at him, picks up her cleaning materials, and goes softly towards door.]

Harry. Is Mrs. Pemberton down?

Cookie. Down this 'arf hour sir, and 'ard at it as usual.

Harry. Ask her to be kind enough to come to me here.

Cookie. I will, sir. [She throws another searching, perturbed look at Harry and goes off. Harry remains standing, looking straight ahead. After a pause Mrs. Pemberton enters cheerfully.]

Mrs. P. Do you want me, dear?

Harry [hoarsely]. Yes. Please come in and shut the door.

Mrs. P. [looks anxious, returns to door and shuts it, then goes quickly to Harry's side and puts her hands on Harry's shoulders]. Is anything the matter?

Harry [moving away from her]. Don't!

Mrs. P. [aghast]. Harry!

Harry. For the first time in our married life you have broken faith with me.

Mrs. P. I have?

Harry. Yes. If you had broken faith with me before it might not have mattered, but in this instance you have brought tragedy into this quiet house.

Mrs. P. [*gasping*]. Harry! What have I done?

Harry. It isn't what you've done. It is what you've left undone! Is there any need for me to tell you what this is?

Mrs. P. [*with a premonition*]. Yes, I . . .

Harry. You said that you would speak to Effie. You promised that you would speak to Effie.

Mrs. P. It was so difficult. I—I tried, I—

Harry. There is no excuse.

Mrs. P. There is an excuse. . . .

Harry. There is no excuse. We went deeply into the matter. It seemed to us to be an unfulfilled duty. You agreed to speak, you prevented me from speaking.

Mrs. P. Again and again I tried, and I couldn't, I couldn't. I will speak to-morrow.

Harry. The time to speak was yesterday,—to-morrow will be too late.

Mrs. P. [*startled*]. Too late!

Harry. Yes. Too late.

Mrs. P. What do you mean?

Harry. Exactly what I say.

Mrs. P. Harry! . . . Harry!

Harry. When I came back just now, I found Effie in Archie Graham's bedroom.

Mrs. P. [*with a cry*]. Oh!

Harry. He said that Effie came to his room without being called by him. He said that she was hiding when you went into it. He said that she waited for him in his room from twelve o'clock last night until four this morning. He told me that they love each other. He lied to me once, he is lying again. . . . The man who ruined Mary Ann blamed her ignorance. Archie Graham blames Effie's ignorance. He blames you and me . . . and oh, my God, he has the right. We have given Mary Ann a sister in Effie.

Mrs. P. [*weeping*]. What are we to do? What are we to do?

Harry. Go about our duties. There is nothing to be done. Yesterday and to-day are no longer ours, there is only to-morrow. To-morrow is ours and with God's help we will see that there shall be no more ignorance among young girls. What if Effie had been Mary Ann, I said. Effie! [*He puts his hands over his face.*]

Effie [*rushing in wildly*]. Father! What have you said to Archie?

Harry. Why?

Effie. He's gone into his room and won't answer me. He has locked his door.

Harry [*for the first time showing great emotion and anger*]. Why lock his door now?

Effie. I don't understand. Why are you like this? Why is everything so different? Why is mother crying?

Harry. Ask her.

Effie. Mother! [*She goes swiftly to Mrs. P. and takes her in her arms.*]

Mrs. P. Oh, my baby!

Effie. What is it? What's happened? Why don't you tell me? Mother, why can't you speak?

Mrs. P. I wish I had spoken. . . . I wish I had. [*She releases herself and sinks into chair by table and puts her head down upon her arms.*]

Effie [*turning to her father*]. Father, tell me what all this means. You made Archie treat me like this, you.

Harry. Archie Graham has lied to me.

Effie. What about?

Harry. Himself and you.

Effie. I don't understand.

Harry. He said that he and you love each other.

116 THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

Effie. Is that what's the matter? Of course we love each other.

Harry [eagerly]. That is true, then?

Effie. As true as life. Of course we love each other. I loved him when he first came. I loved him the moment I saw him. I found it out this morning when he came back.

Harry [quickly]. This morning?

Effie. Yes. I'd missed him so. Surely that hasn't made you like this?

Harry. No. That was natural enough. That was only to be expected. It isn't that.

Effie. Then what is it? I ask to know. If Archie has done anything I have a right to know. He is mine and I must share his troubles. Fetch Archie. [*She waves her hand imperiously.*]

Harry. No. Leave Archie where he is. I want to speak to you. . . . You say that you found out this morning for the first time that you love that boy?

Effie. Yes.

Harry. Has he ever spoken of love to you before this morning?

Effie. No. He wouldn't have said a word this morning. It was my fault he said it then.

Harry. Your fault? How?

Effie. After he got the telegram from his friend he's been different. He avoided me all

that evening. He didn't look at me and he didn't say good night.

Harry. Go on.

Effie. When I went into his room this morning . . .

Harry [*quickly*]. Did he call you?

Effie. No. He didn't know I was awake, but I heard him talking to you. I went in directly you'd gone. I couldn't wait till I was dressed. I'd been waiting so long. He tried to send me away. He did nothing but try to send me away. It was my only chance of seeing him alone and he drove me to speak. I won't *have* him avoid me. I love him and he loves me, and I'm a woman, not a child any longer. Mayn't I think about *my* life now and *my* feelings? I tell you we love each other. What have you said to him to make him treat me as though I were poisonous?

Harry. Nothing.

Effie. Then what's the matter with me? Why has he locked his door? Why won't he answer me when I call?

Harry [*taking Effie in his arms and kissing her*]. Go with your mother, my little girl, and let her make you a woman.

Effie. I don't understand.

Harry. No, but you shall. [*He goes to his wife, picks up her hand and kisses it.*] Oh, my

dear, let us thank God for one thing. It *isn't* too late. Take her to your room.

Mrs. P. Harry! . . . Come, darling.

Harry. Send that boy to me here. [*Mrs. P. puts her arm round Effie's waist and leads her off. Harry goes to the window and stands looking out. Enter Cookie.*]

Cookie. Come in, will yer? [*Enter Mrs. Lemmins.*]

Mrs. L. I'm afraid I don't do right to come so early, sir.

Harry. Perfectly right, Mrs. Lemmins. Sit down.

Mrs. L. Thank you kindly, sir. [*Sits. Cookie jerks her head and goes off.*]

Harry. You've not told Mary Ann?

Mrs. L. No, sir, she's still asleep.

Harry. I'm glad. . . . The funeral is at twelve o'clock.

Mrs. L. [*chokily*]. In the . . . church-yard, sir?

Harry. Where else?

Mrs. L. Thank God. [*She throws her apron over her head and cries.*]

Harry. Mrs. Lemmins, I want you to do something for me. I want you to be kind enough to let me ask to this little funeral some of the mothers in the village. I have something to say to them this morning which, if I

had been a better servant of God, I should have said to them years ago.

Mrs. L. [huskily]. Must I have my disgrace known to everybody, sir?

Harry. Yes. Your disgrace and mine must be made known. The moment has arrived when I have got to deal honestly with the truth. In the little coffin lies the body of a baby without a name. It is called the child of sin, and it is wrongly called so. It is not the child of sin, but of ignorance, and for its birth you and every one of the mothers who are coming with us to the churchyard are to blame, and I as much as any. Its mother is a child. It will be said of her that she has gone wrong. She will be pointed at and sneered at and giggled at, and a stigma will hang to her dress like a burr. [*Mrs. Lemmins cries more loudly.*] But she is blameless. The one who is to blame is her mother.

Mrs. L. Me, sir? Oh!

Harry. Yes. Mrs. Lemmins, you. If you had told poor little Mary Ann the reason of her motherhood, a spotless life would not have been stained. God would never have heard the agonised cry of a childless mother and this little grave would never have been dug. Oh, my dear mother, for God's sake, Who loves little children, get all the mothers and the future

mothers that you know to tell their children the truth. Implore them never to forget this little grave for which we are all responsible. Show them that if they don't wish their girls to go through what Mary Ann has suffered they must not lie or quibble to spare themselves. If they do there will be a grave in their lives too. Never let them forget this little grave. While their daughters are still young tell them to put their arms round them and let them know what it means to be a woman. . . . Help me to let innocence remain in their homes by thrusting out ignorance and to keep their children modest by permitting themselves no false modesty. You and I must never let any woman in this village forget our little grave. [*Collins appears at window with a large bunch of lilies.*]

Collins. Lilies, sir.

Harry [*goes to window, takes lilies, nods to Collins, who disappears, and returns with them to Mrs. Lemmins*]. Till twelve o'clock.

Mrs. L. [*rising*]. Thank you, sir.

Harry. Take these.

Mrs. L. Yus, sir.

Harry. God bless you. [*He goes to door, opens it and stands there. Mrs. L. smothers a sob and as she goes out she bobs to Harry. Harry shuts the door and comes down stage. Archie appears R. of window. His head is*

bent down and is hurrying past. Harry makes a dash at the window and catches the boy by the arm.]

Harry. Where are you going?

Archie [*shouting*]. Let me go.

Harry. I won't let you go.

Archie. Let me go I tell you.

Harry. Come into my room.

Archie. I won't.

Harry. I order you into my room. [*The boy instinctively obeys.*]

Harry. Stand up. Look at me.

Archie [*bursting out*]. Let me go. You don't believe in me. You. I can't live over that.

Harry. I do believe in you, old man. . . . I do. I believe every word that you said. You behaved like a gentleman and a man of honour and I thank you. Forgive me. [*Archie peers up into Harry's face, gives a great sob and puts his hands over his face. Flings himself into a chair and bursts out crying. Harry goes to door and locks it, goes to the window and shuts it, crosses to the boy and stands over him.*]

Harry. Old fellow, I did you a great injustice. I am as bad as the others with whom you've been. You are a better man than I am, Archie Graham. I will take a lesson from you.

Archie. For God's sake don't say that.

Harry. It is our fault. Not Effie's and not yours that you were put to the test. You've won. Please forgive me.

Archie [springing up and giving his hands to *Harry*]. Oh . . . sir! [*Harry* puts his arms round the boy's shoulders and pats them, holds him at arm's length and looks at him. As his right hand goes down to grasp the boy's left hand, it comes into contact with something hard in the boy's pocket.]

Harry [recoiling]. What's that thing in your pocket?

Archie. Nothing. It . . . it doesn't matter now.

Harry [frightfully agitated]. Give it to me.

Archie. I'd rather not. Don't ask me for it.

Harry [holding out a shaking hand]. Give it to me I tell you. [*Archie* hesitates, puts his hand in his pocket and brings out a pistol. *Harry* springs forward, catches the boy by the wrist and takes the pistol from his hand.]

Harry [hoarsely]. You were going . . . to use this . . .

Archie. You didn't believe me. I'd worked for nothing.

Harry. Oh, my God. I might have killed this boy.

Archie. Oh, please . . . I . . .

Harry [*holds the pistol out in the palm of his hand and looks at it; in a low voice.*] Sit down. [*Archie sits at desk C. Harry stands very still for a moment. He looks old and worn.*]

Harry. I am going to make a confession to you that I've made to no other living man or woman. You wring it out of me by what you've done for me, and for my wife, and Effie. . . . Do you remember my saying the first day you came here that I hoped I should never have to tell you why I went into the Church?

Archie. Yes, but don't, please . . .

Harry. I must, because I want you to know how sorry I am for judging and disbelieving you, and because I want to remind myself of that other time when God drew me up and showed me that if a man is without mercy he is not fit to be a son of his father. [*He goes to his desk and sits down, putting the revolver in front of him.*] You once called me splendid. I was so splendid a fellow at Oxford, with my cricket blue, my presidency of the union, my popularity, my admiring set, my career gleaming ahead, that I didn't believe in God, I believed

only in myself. I was so splendid that I passed judgments on my fellows and had no mercy for weakness and broken words. I was not weak. I *never* broke my word. . . . I had a friend, a Jonathan, whom I loved and trusted. We were together at Eton, in the same college at Oxford. We rose together, step by step, in work and out of it. There was one other person besides myself, in whom I believed. It was this friend. . . . We were both poor men, soldiers' sons. Our fathers deprived themselves of their few luxuries to send us to Oxford. They were men who looked to us to do well, but, above all, to keep their names bright. We were both to be barristers. We had our eyes on Parliament. Ambition was our fetish. We backed ourselves to win. . . . It was the custom of our fathers to pay into our bank all the money it was necessary for us to have for the year. In the Michaelmas term of our third year my friend came to me and told me that his father was in temporary need of money. He asked me to lend him, to pass on to his father, all the money I had to see me through my third year. It would be returned in a fortnight. I believed in this man and without a moment's hesitation, wrote the cheque. . . . The fortnight came to an end. The money was not returned. I let another

fortnight go by and needed money. I was forced to remind my friend of his guarantee. . . . He confessed, brokenly and with shame, that his father had neither needed the money nor had it. The story was a lie. He, himself, had needed the money to pay racing debts, thinking that he could get it from an old uncle to pay me back. But the uncle had been bled before. He refused to be bled again. . . . I knew that my father could give me no more. I saw all my chances ruined, all that I worked for gone for nothing. The one way of my remaining at Oxford, my forlorn hope, was to tell my friend's father of his son's treachery, and leave it to him to make it good. . . . He lived in Scotland. I got permission from the authorities to go to Scotland on urgent business. I left my friend, mercilessly, well knowing that the germ of suicide was in his brain. . . . Between London and Rugby there was a frightful accident. Three men in my carriage were killed. I lay for an hour unhurt, pinned down with wreckage. . . . In that long, waiting hour God came to me — and when I returned hot speed to Oxford and rushed to my friend's room, I found him lying face downwards on the floor with a bullet through his brain. [*He gives a sob. His head bends low.*] I gave up my career and became a servant of God.

[There is a pause. Archie stretches out his hand to lay it on Harry's. But he is unable to do so and gets up quietly and bends over the humbled man.]

Archie. Oh, sir, I . . .

Harry [*looking up*]. You remember what I said just now about foundation stones?

Archie. Yes. I shall always remember that.

Harry. I've laid mine twice and both times the building has fallen about my ears. I shall never build a Westminster Abbey. [*He takes up the pistol.*] Lend me this . . . thing, will you?

Archie. If you want it, I . . .

Harry. It will be of infinite use to me. I will keep it [*he goes to desk, opens a drawer and drops it in, locking the drawer*] as a reminder. [*He turns.*] When I marry you and Effie . . .

Archie. Marry? . . . Will you?

Harry. I shall be proud, old man.

Archie. Oh, I'll work so hard to deserve this, sir.

Harry. Of course you will, and when I marry you and Effie we will throw that pistol away. Before that time comes we will both work hard to earn the right to do so. [*Mrs. P. and Effie stop in front of window. They*

are arm in arm and both carry roses. Mrs. P. taps. Archie springs forward and opens window.]

Mrs. P. We are going to give these to Mary Ann's baby, dearest.

Harry. Thank you. [*Mrs. P. stretches out her hand to Archie. He darts forward and bows over it. She smiles at him and leads Effie off R. The gong sounds loudly.*]

Archie [*turning*]. Ah!

Harry. Yes. God's in His Heaven. . . . I wonder what's for breakfast! [*Harry walks to the boy, takes his arm and they go off together.*]

[*Curtain.*]

9256

S R L F

SEE SPINE FOR BARCODE NUMBER

SOUTHERN BRANCH;
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
LIBRARY,
LOS ANGELES, CALIF.

